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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

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Always Trust a Cop — OCTAVUS ROY COHEN
The Old Lady of Bayeux — GEORGES SIMENON
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The Evening Hour — CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

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2. Preferably, stories should not exceed 10,000 words.

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4. The judges who will make the final decision in the contest will be Ellery Queen and the editorial staff of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

5. All entries must be received at the office of the magazine, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y., not later than October 20, 1952.

6. Prize winners will be announced and the prizes awarded by December 31, 1952.

7. All prize winners and all other contestants whose stories are purchased agree to grant Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine book-anthology rights, and when these rights are exercised, they will be paid for as follows: $35 for the original edition, $25 for reprint editions, $25 for British book anthology rights, and a pro rata share of 25% of the royalties if the anthology should be chosen by a book club. Authors of all stories bought through this contest agree to sell non-exclusive foreign rights for $50 per story.

8. Every care will be taken to return unsuitable manuscripts, but Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine cannot accept responsibility for them. Manuscripts should be typed or legibly written, accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope, and mailed by first-class mail to:

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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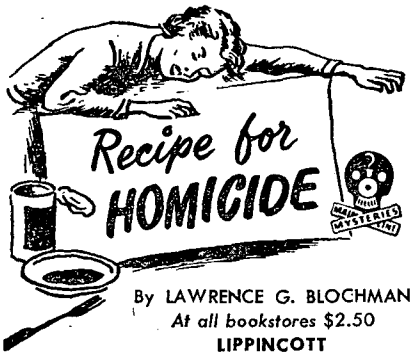

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IVOR BROWN

associate editor of the London Observer
on detective story reading

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CRO-MAGNON CRIMINOLOGIST

Edgar Pangborn's "The Singing Stick" won the Special Award of Merit in EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest. The Special Award of Merit is the second highest prize given in any EQMM contest — second only to the First Prize Winner. Only once before have we presented a Special Award of Merit — to John Dickson Carr's story, "The House in Goblin Wood," in EQMM's Second Annual Contest, five years ago.

Mr. Pangborn's story is a remarkably successful attempt to fuse, to interlock, two different genres of writing. Yes, it can be done: "The Singing Stick" combines pure detection with a science-fiction background. The emphasis, however, as the author intended and as the reader will unquestionably agree, is on the detection of crime, even though the murder in the story takes place in cave-men days and the sleuth is a Cro-Magnon criminologist using necessarily primitive methods of criminal investigation. The ratiocinative result is an altogether fascinating tale whose "plus" values are so essential to the highest form of contemporary detective story and whose larger meanings serve to bridge the vast gap between paleolithic man and modern homo sapiens, and by this bridge throw light on the very problems which man faces today . . .

The author, who is in his middle forties, is a full-time writer, but he spends all his spare time building up a farm in upstate New York. He has raised chickens in Maine, has a touch of Harvard (although he left Harvard to study music, only to admit years later that the "big" talent wasn't there), fought in the Pacific theatre during World War II, and in an otherwise uneventful life has devoted most of his time to "learning the rudiments of how to put two or three sentences together and make sense."

Mr. Pangborn thinks that "anyone who tries to write detective stories should have a sort of credo and set of principles." His is very simple: he just loves 'em.

His prize-winning story probably owes its existence to an incorrigible habit which compels the author to think of all humanity — past, present, and future — as one species, with continually recurring problems not peculiar to any time or place. Mr. Pangborn believes that the very state of being an active biped with an overdeveloped brain is a never-ending challenge, and that it must have been that way even long before the first flint was chipped. So far as the deeper traits are concerned, the cave man was not too different from modern man: true, he lacked our multitude of

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gadgets, our lacquer of civilization, and our thousands of extra years of tradition and experiment; but surely the cave man got hurt and puzzled in the same basic ways that we get hurt and puzzled and confused today.

In other words, the Cro-Magnons were people too; and if you accept this indisputable premise, you will find "The Singing Stick" a tale not only of primitive culture and prehistoric living conditions, but also — the essential ingredient of every fine story — a tale of people, caught in the eternal mesh of problems and conflicts, and ever striving toward a more reasoning, more thinking plane of human behavior.

THE SINGING STICK

by EDGAR PANGBORN

BEYOND THE RIVER WAS THE MELancholy green, almost blackness, of advancing pine forest. Ambling naked from his cave into afternoon sunshine, Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms, the Old Man, the leader of the tribe, gazed across the valley. Trouble would come; when it came, the pines would know.

The pines were kindred to the Not-Men they sheltered — bear, wolf, snake; kin to the black leopard who five winters ago had writhed past Samar's spear when that Old Man's foot had slipped, giving Gnar leadership of the tribe. The pines knew.

In Gnar's youth (more winters past than he could mark on the fingers of both hands) the river's far side had been grassland, lifting to the region where Light-God-Too-Bright-To-See followed Light-That-Wakes. A vast boulder over there had once been visible from these cliffside caves, and the blunt profile of the spirit living in it. Now the pines had him captive, hidden away.

The river's near side was still trustworthy — tall-grass meadow; oaks, spreading shade that attracted bison, aurochs, deer. Sometimes mammoth splashed through the ford in the south to wander up the valley.

Northward down yonder, to the left, Gnar could see the mound, a rockpile clothed in bushes and thin earth, where his elder brother Morg-of-the-Hump had found a cave and chosen to live. Always different, Morg-of-the-Hump, carried a private god on twisted shoulders. Morg, the vision-seeker, the finder of new things, like that loop snare — why, it was nothing but a sapling and deerhide thong; but none ever dreamed of such a device until Morg gave it to the tribe. No one knew so much as Morg of the unseen, the ways of the Not-Men, the reading of dreams.

Morg could have become leader

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when Samar's foot slipped, though it had been Gnar who killed the leopard and spoke the first death-prayers. But while blood from claw-wounds still crimsoned the snow, Morg had placed the spear of Samar in Gnar's half-unwilling hands.

The next summer Morg had taken his one woman, Morca-of-the-Thin-Flanks (he could have had others), and gone to that cave in the grassland, explaining nothing. An unlikely place, foggy at morning, surely spirit-infested at night. Some hated him for living apart; they muttered that his cave-fire would anger the Not-Men of the valley.

No one shared Morg's wisdom, yet often he showed Gnar mysteries. Why? Gnar's mind was one that hungered for reasons.

Early in this pleasant summer Morg had shown him the Singing Stick, a peeled branch of ash grooved at the ends. Morg had said: "Camgar the Great is in this." Gnar had made nothing of it. Then his brother had fastened a deerhide thong at one end and bent the stick to loop the thong on the other end; and had plucked at it. So Gnar understood that the god Camgar was in the resonance. "What does he say, my brother?"

Morg had placed the Stick on a natural shelf beside the Nameless Image and something wrapped in wolf-hide. Morg's answer had been so long delayed it might have had nothing to do with Gnar's question. "Meat enough for all." Morg had not spoken of the Singing Stick again.

The Nameless Image was itself a mystery. Morg said it was not sacred, merely old; he had found it in the dust when he first cleaned the cave-floor for a living place. "Men-Here-Before-Us made it," Morg said. "If a god, it was their god. I honor it, but my brother is greatest of the image-makers: he will have no fear of it." The image was of clay (perhaps) — hard, smooth, blackened. It had two faces on one head; two bodies in one, male and female. The male face was alert, the other brooding. "It tells me, Gnar, that even gods die or go away." A saying Gnar could not accept, but did not deny.

Leadership had not been lightly established for Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms. There had been Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back: sullen, almost Gnar's match in strength. Not quite, as Suchin learned when he challenged according to the laws. Gnar had let him live. A mistake perhaps; but now in the mild sunshine Gnar thought: *I have my ways. Suchin hunts well and is a shaper of fine flints.*

He studied the valley with small distance-loving gray eyes, enjoying his idleness. The hard-fleshed arms that gave him his formal name were limp in relaxation, tired from the painting in the cave. Only he could have drawn that large backward swing of head and horns. No image-maker was the equal of Gnar: the elder brother said so. This achievement would urge the Bison-Spirit to guide his people through the valley, now and in coming times.

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Valley grass was parting and closing — wolf: insolent, knowing the length of a spear-cast. But the women and children hunting roots in the meadow would have seen or smelled the beast, and would not stray. Gnar's second woman, Croma-Who-Speaks-Softly, was clever with the light spear. Not exciting to look at like Morg's strange woman, but good and teachable — as Gnar's first woman, Camo, had once been good.

Some devil had entered Camo-Followed-by-the-Hawk, to make her a hag of foul temper and senseless talk, imagining herself a bitch wolf, and always crying of invisible snakes. She had to be fed, restrained, not destroyed. Gnar knew that the mad are protected by the great Camagar himself: whoever destroys them is haunted even on the westward journey to the Country-Beyond-Gray-Water, where it is always summer. . . .

Kofar-the-Speechless, the boy who held the torch for Gnar's painting, emerged now and squatted in the sun to scratch and daydream. Born of brown-eyed Croma five and four summers past; runty and dumb, but useful. Gnar wondered often who of the Homeless-Wandering had entered Croma to become Kofar. Squirrel? Kofar had a squirrely look. Few spirits of men need ever join the Homeless-Wandering: urged by the prayers of the living, they made the westward journey. It was the dead Not-Men who made the hosts of the Homeless-Wandering, seeking a final incarnation. In a few summers Kofar would go through his pre-initiation fasting; Morg-of-the-Hump would read the boy's dreams and learn his over-spirit and the true name that cannot be spoken — for Morg was wise in these things.

Mas and Mani, twin sons of mad Camo, were now in early manhood. Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth, Mani-Who-Smiles — their overspirit was the Wolf. That could have been guessed (for Mas anyway) before the dream-reading. They ought to go away down-river, take women from another tribe, choose new living-places: it was time. Mani at least understood it. But there was some tie between the brothers, a magic of twin births. Likely they would go together or not at all.

Mas the rebel, impudent; Mani the respecter of laws. Mas rough and peevish; Mani courteous — like the north wind Sruhurr and the drowsy south wind Sarasha. Mas angered and goaded Gnar; Mani never. Therefore why, even when they were children, had he been forbearing, even tender with Mas, scarcely noticing Mani whom Camo had loved best, sheltered most jealously at night? Mani was the stronger, the graceful one. Mas wore a sneer; his body was restless. Mani moved like the south wind, and his smile melted anger. Mani spent too much time with the women and children, making foolish things of mud and woven grass, dolls and ornaments; but though he watched the women too much, Gnar did not think

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that Mani had overstepped the laws. Mas might well have done so.

Trouble was certain to come if they stayed. Gnar had spoken of it a few days ago — obliquely, not as a command — when Mas and Mani were to go with the six others in a hunting group, leaving Gnar to guard the women and young. Mani had understood, bending to touch the Old Man's foot as a young man ought to do. Seven caves, nine grown men — Mani understood. But Mas had merely fingered his spear in open arrogance.

Gnar's own spear had lifted, shivering. The others froze, till it lowered. Fury had not left Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms, but something (the spirit of Camgar?) was heavy on him. He would have been within the laws to kill Mas: the insolence was enough. But he had simply given the words for good luck and sent the group on its way.

They were good men. Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back; Mas and Mani; Dashim-the-Chatterer, old, dry, subtle, once ambitious for leadership; Cogan-of-the-Red-Mark, big, sober, master of the hunters in Gnar's absence; Dunifor-the-Stumbler, noisy, bowlegged, good-natured; Sunis-the-Singer, greenly young, inheritor of the cave Morg had abandoned; and Ducam-the-Dreamer, in middle years, stingy with words, face gray-scarred from the anger of a bear, a shaper of flints second only to Suchin. Good hunters all. Crossing the valley, they sang an old prayer-song. At the ford they became silent, then slipped away to the south.

They should soon be returning. Yes, there would be trouble. Gnar thought: *I have my ways. The time was not right, and besides . . .*

He needed talk with his brother. Between him and Morg was a cautious unworded love. He wished he might hear the Singing Stick again. After the women and children returned perhaps he would go down there.

His gaze lifted to cloud-shapes. The white flow created an illusion of a cave-bear; a mammoth; by degrees, a possible woman-shape. . . . Kofar-the-Speechless was watching the clouds too. Do children think? — Gnar chuckled at the notion and forgot Kofar, studying the ford.

Gnar followed a stream below the cliff to within a hundred paces of his brother's cave. In an hour, Light-God-Too-Bright-To-See would be gone. He had kept an eye on the ford — as the lie of the land permitted; now he glimpsed motion and dropped in a concealing crouch. The hunting-group? He curled his left hand, straightening the fingers one by one. The men were his own. But it should have been five fingers and three. But only five men appeared — five men who should have been five and three.

Perhaps the summer had been too lucky, annoying the gods. His eyes probed. He saw Cogan-of-the-Red-Mark. Dunifor was also there, his back curved to a load cut to suit his shoulders: meat, not a dead man.

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Mas, Mani, Suchin — missing. . . .

Had the youths gone away for the right reasons? But why Suchin?

They should have helped bring the meat, then sought permission to go, and received the words of luck. Mas might have ignored that, but Mani was a respecter of the laws. And why Suchin? — he owned a cave, and a woman.

Gnar murmured: "First I will speak with my brother." The words had the strength of immediate purpose. A hint of sound made him whirl.

Only Kofar. The child had followed silently and now watched Gnar with a doubtful smirk, runty, pot-bellied, ready to scuttle. It had happened before, this absurd following. Kofar smiled appeasingly. . . .

Morca-of-the-Thin-Flanks, she who had never given birth, drooped in the cave entrance, black hair in disorder, watching Gnar with the rigid gaze of something trapped.

"I will talk with my brother," said Gnar.

Morca's hand pressed against her flat chest, then pointed at the late sun, circled about her head, and fell.

The spirit lives where you feel it pulsing. Morca was saying that a spirit had started westward and returned confused, bound to the place where it had left the body. More than that. She was obeying the law which decreed that a widow must not use her voice, nor eat, nor drink, nor care for herself, nor sleep, till the tribe decides what shall become of her.

So Gnar knew his brother was dead.

He thought: *My body is weak. Will this pass?*

Morca had not kept the fire living. Gnar rested a pine branch in its embers, blowing till flames danced at the end.

"Go westward, my brother." He set the torch between rocks, not able yet to look into Morg's large-boned face. Coldness was here; and sorrow, an immortal womb preparing other sorrows. "Go westward; do not trouble us." The words were sanctioned by ages.

There was no blood in sight, no visible injury. Morg's arms spread to the edges of the leopard-skin, fingers extended, stained with earth and grass; stains were on his knees, the front of his thighs and twisted chest. There were abrasions on his nose and chin.

"All shall be done to aid your journey, Morg-of-the-Hump. Do not stay with the Homeless-Wandering." Gnar knelt; his downcast eyes noted twin lines on the earth floor. "Westward it is always summer. . . ." Morg had died in the grass, falling forward, and had been dragged here by one lacking strength to lift him — Morca. That was proper. She would have known he must not lie out for the wolves.

"I will watch without sleep, with the true prayers, until your spear is given to your right hand; your drinking horn shall be with you, and food for the journey." No blood? No injury? Men died, Gnar knew, by violence of others, by the weapons of

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the Not-Men, or by sorcery: there was no other way. "In Country-Beyond-Gray-Water the Old Men speak your true name; you will have meat and big-thighed women; no storms, but the rain is soft; no hunger, no snows, no dying. Do not let the Homeless-Wandering deceive you: go westward." Gnar lifted the body — with trouble, because a rigid arm would not yield — and turned it gently face down. "Camgar the Great will —" his voice blurred out. Here was the wound, but —

"Camgar will see that the debt is paid. You shall have peace."

Under the distortion of the shoulder was a gash with something hidden in the flesh below it — a broken wooden shaft. So the mangling could not have been done by the withdrawing of a spear-head. A spear does not twist; it drives straight as a hawk. No spear could be as slight as this fragment — frail enough to splinter in one hand. . . . Sorcery.

Sorcery, yes, but. . . . Gnar pressed his high forehead in the flat of his arm. A stone can kill, but it will not enter the flesh. Gnar groaned. Was all knowledge slipping out of reach? There was much to do — the prayers, the watching, the dances. He must think of the tribe: how to shield it from the dark powers released by a death. But his mind said only, over and over: *I have lost my brother.*

A wordless squall — Kofar again. Kofar-the-Speechless blundering in, seeing an angry mouth in Morg's back. From jangled nerves Gnar would have struck the child, but Kofar rushed out after one long scream.

The Singing Stick was not on the ledge where Morg had kept it, nor was the wolf-hide bundle. The Nameless Image watched alone, improperly smeared with dust. Gnar felt true terror. What had Morg said of the Stick? — "Camgar the Great is in this." Had Morg stolen a forbidden thing?

There was a way to learn, if a man could endure it. . . .

The pine torch muttered out. Gnar covered his face, trying not to think at all, yet thinking: *I am the greatest of the painters of bulls.* Then carefully he said aloud: "Camgar, if my brother offended, I offend also. I heard the Stick. I held it, my hands unpurified. . . ."

Only dying daylight crept in from the cave mouth. Sweat formed; the spirit fluttered and calmed. No answer must be a full answer.

Morca-of-the-Thin-Flanks sheltered Kofar, stroking his back, watching Gnar with dismaying indifference. Gnar understood that women do not think, in any recognizable way; yet they feel much — pain, fright, probably pleasure; they can use speech intelligibly.

The decision of the tribe was with Gnar. He could destroy her, and the tribe would consider it justice. She had never been liked nor wanted by any but his brother. Too wild, thin, disturbing.

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She did not cringe. She seemed not even interested. Gnar had examined guilty women: the soft creatures were inexpert at blanking out their faces. They did not act as Morca did now.

"Come with me to the place where you found him."

Kofar clung to her. She walked into the meadow some hundred paces toward the river, and pointed to beaten grass. There was blood — some, not much.

The meadow was endlessly criss-crossed with the Not-Men's marks. Gnar would retain the pattern in detail behind his eyes so long as needed. When the agony of the watching was ended, he could return and still follow a certain trail he saw.

Morg-of-the-Hump had stood facing the mound, stumbled forward, fallen. Then one had come from the river to stand here, balls of the feet pressing deeply as he bent over — to break that magic shaft? And had gone away — back toward the river.

Fresher was the story Morca's feet had written.

Spirits of those killed by violence linger at the spot. Gnar pleaded silently. No word. No breeze, not even a scurrying of mice in the grass.

"You have leave to use your voice. When did you find him?"

"Sunrise." Her throat was dry. "He was not with me in the night. He hunted at night, sometimes . . . as no other man ever dared."

"He was stiff? Cold?"

She moaned, hugging her thin breasts. "He was — almost warm."

Warmth follows the spirit not very slowly. Morg would have died not long before sunrise. The Moon-Spirit had been brilliant — even ordinary men might have dared to go a short way into the night.

"There was no spear-shaft in him?"

"Spear-shaft? . . . Nothing, Old Man. Only the wound."

"His blood was dry?"

"It was drying, Old Man."

"Speak carefully — did my brother expect to die?"

The whites of her eyes gleamed and were veiled. "He did not say so. He was in great unhappiness after the Singing Stick was taken."

Gnar drew back. "*You* knew of the Singing Stick?"

"He showed it to me, Old Man. He said the noise of the thong was nothing to fear. He fashioned the Stick himself. There were other sticks — those I never saw; they were wrapped in wolf-hide. He took them whenever he went away with the Singing Stick."

"Stick, wolf-hide, spear — no man burdens his hands with so much."

"Old Man, he would leave the spear behind."

"That cannot be truth."

She glanced at Gnar's spear. "It is truth."

"The Stick was taken from him? You say that?"

Now she did look frightened. "Five and four suns past. For that I was to blame. The — the south wind Sarasha — I thought . . ."

Gnar goaded her with questions, drawing forth the story. As she was

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minding the cave in Morg's absence five and four afternoons ago, a painted clay necklace fell from the sky, she said. She thought it a gift of the south wind, and left her duty to run after it. And then she hurried to the pool — near the cave, she pleaded, only a moment's walk — to look at her color-spirit in the water. When she returned, Singing Stick and wolf-hide bundle were gone. The Nameless Image was down in the dust — this she had restored at once, praying forgiveness. She had confessed everything to Morg, she said. "He did not strike me. He was only in a great unhappiness, and searched, days and nights, but without fortune."

"Where is the necklace?"

"I threw it in the river. The south wind deceives everyone."

"You were deceived, but not by Sarasha. A man or a sorcerer hid in the rocks above you and threw the necklace to tempt you."

Had she actually not seen through this simple trickery? She drove her hand down the front of her body, leaving a red line, and turned her face away. "Old Man — Morg-of-the-Hump told me, long ago, that if his spirit went westward before yours, the Nameless Image must go to your hands, no other's."

"I will take it." Gnar returned to the cave. Morca ought to have built a signal fire, or screamed loudly enough to be heard up at the caves. Had she only sat there through the day, doing nothing? Guilt? But Morca-of-the-Thin-Flanks surely knew nothing of sorcery. . . . He sent out a shrill, long cry. The answer floated from the cliffside path; the hunters would come quickly. Five and four suns ago! That was three suns before the hunting-group had set out. . . .

Morca's voice touched him lightly: "It is decided?"

He reminded himself that Morg had set a high value on this difficult woman. "It is decided. After the purifications you may eat, drink, and sleep. You will be among my women."

"I will try to please you," she said indifferently.

He nodded, thinking: *The slayer is to be slain, by my hand. I have undertaken it, my brother.*

Dashim-the-Chatterer walked with Gnar, a proper half-pace behind. Ahead, two carried and two guarded the body of Morg-of-the-Hump.

Morca followed, with Kofar. Perhaps she did wrong to touch the child before purification. Obviously she must not touch a man; but Kofar was a child of scant promise, who perhaps ought to have been put away. Gnar asked: "Suchin, Mas, Mani?"

Dashim's forehead crinkled. "Old Man, they separated from us three suns east of here. They were to hunt in land not well known to us and return by the ford in the north. Then we were delayed, finding aurochs and following. The three should have been here before us."

"By whose wish did they separate from you?"

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"The wish of the young men. Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back was pleased to join them. Cogan-of-the-Red-Mark permitted it. Is the Old Man angry?"

Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms did not answer. He thought: *The two who hate me, and one who honors me. Camgar, O Great Guide, protect the return of Mani who respects the laws.* But in justice his mind persisted: *Suchin respects the laws. He challenged me according to the laws.* Persisting still: *Let them all return, even Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth. . . .*

There was pain in Gnar, so like pain of the flesh, that he wondered if he had wrenched his body lifting his brother's weight for the bearers. There were images from the past, always of Morg — some from the far past. Morg the boy of twisted shoulders, wrestling with him in the deep sunlight. Morg the man of silences, unpredictable words. Morg-of-the-Hump who never quarreled, yet was feared. Morg telling him — him only — of journeys into the dark where there was moonlight spilling from the wings of owls; Morg saying — smiling on the words — that Camgar was in the dangerous night as surely as in the day. The wise brother putting in his hands the spear of Samar; and showing him the Singing Stick. . . .

I am bewitched. There is sorcery against me. But I will not yield. He wrestled with the pain; his mind was a darkness like smoke, memory a flame seen through smoke, bitter and brilliant; he wrestled with it, finding love to be one form of sorcery not lightly overcome.

Fingering the Nameless Image, yet scarcely aware of it, Gnar fell back to walk beside Morca. Her eyes were stubbornly downcast. "Did any man seek to come to you while my brother lived?"

Her hands tightened to harmless fists. "Is it the fault of women —"

"I look for no fault, but for truth."

She said at last, flushed and sullen: "No man desires me. I am thin. Even the Homeless-Wandering despise me."

Gnar thought: *It is like lifting water in the hands — the meaning slips away.* A new thought clamored: *How can the death be sorcery? A sorcerer steals life without a wound — with fever, blotching of skin, wasting of flesh. He needs no little sticks. . . . Camgar, O Great Guide, what must I do? . . .*

Holding the spear on crossed legs, motionless beside his brother, Gnar heard the three return at the end of latest-day. He heard the challenge of the sentinel Cogan, the dark voice of Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back answering: "One fire only. None to meet us?"

"Death, Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back." On duty or in time of trouble, solemn Cogan would not have dreamed of using the simple form of address. "No dances till the death dances. We stay apart from the women."

Mas, drawling with anger: "I and my brother have no women."

Cogan's enormous hand cracked on Mas's cheek. Gnar thought: *Can my brother have no peace?* Then came

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Mani's voice, warm, placating: Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth meant no harm, Cogan-of-the-Red-Mark. Who has been taken?"

Cogan said only: "The Old Man has begun the watching. Go quietly. Tell of the hunt if he gives you leave."

They were beyond the watch-fire, waiting permission to set down their burdens. Gnar let the waiting be long. When at last he pointed to the ground, Suchin dropped a haunch of elk. Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth, his cheek still reddened, set down another haunch, with the heart and liver. Mani-Who-Smiles had brought the whole carcass of a half-grown doe, blood matted at the base of her torn throat. Gnar glanced permissively at Suchin.

"Old Man, we separated from the others three suns ago —"

"Who decided that?"

Suchin grunted. Mani waited for his brother who was silent, and said: "In the second night my brother dreamed of elk." He glanced again at Mas, who nodded idly. "When we talked of this during Light-That-Wakes, it seemed from certain signs that the elk he found in the dream was moving into the north country."

Gnar motioned to Suchin to continue.

"After leaving the others, we three also separated, each to take a part of the new ground, agreeing to meet at the north ford before the end of three suns. My part was pine forest; I found nothing. At late-day of the second sun I was at the ford, alone. I slept in a tree not too near the ford, fearing leopard. At the rising of the sun just gone, I hunted near the ford, without luck, but at high-sun Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth came and told of killing an elk. I went with him. When we returned with what we could carry it was late-day, and Mani-Who-Smiles was at the ford with the little deer."

Gnar had watched the dead face of Morg-of-the-Hump. He flickered a glance at Mas. "Tell of the elk."

"A good bull. My first throw cut the flank; I followed till night, again at morning — then he was down. I slit the throat."

"And the deer?"

Mani was staring at the body of Morg-of-the-Hump; the others had averted their eyes; he spoke without sign of pride: "Old Man, no more than a fawn. I came on her where she was lying in tall grass. She fled and my spear found her."

Gnar looked a third time into his brother's face. A third time Morg-of-the-Hump gave no sign. Gnar said: "Take your rest."

Suchin and Mani moved away; the women would attend to the meat. Mas lingered. "Things change," he said, with a studied yawn. "We have been a long time under one leadership."

Gnar's hand was quiet on the spear. "You were taught the laws, wolf-whelp. When the time is right and the dances are ended, I will meet you, and spread your blood on the ground if it must be so."

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Mas looked almost tranquil then. He said: "I will meet you." That was according to the laws. He walked up the ledge toward the harsh path to the burial grounds, to rest somewhere out there in the higher darkness with the sky over him, and not in the cave where wolf-spirits had found his mother.

Give my brother light on the westward journey, Camgar, O Great Creator, Restrain the north wind Sruhurr, restrain him. . . .

And there were challenges to be spoken against the invisible: leopard-women of the Homeless-Wandering who would try to entice Morg-of-the-Hump with swayings of lust; devils who might steal parts of his flesh to bind the spirit.

Twice Morca, smeared with mud and ashes, came with fuel for the fire, according to the laws. After the watching she would go to the stream below the cliff and wash away the ritual stains; at the dances in the burial grounds she could gash her cheeks and wail with the other women. Now she moved, as she ought to do, like a small ghost not ready for life. It was physical agony to Gnar when a screech from Camo met Morca's return to the cave. The silence had become a perfect thing, a clear pool in the dark; this noise was a familiar shame. "Snake! Snake!" Camo screamed at Morca. "Look, look at her loins — she never gave birth. A black snake that kills, that bites in the dust — but I bore two sons. There were two wolves —"

Gnar heard Croma-Who-Speaks-Softly cuff the madwoman to silence, not gently. The pool of silence slowly cleared.

A new struggle raged now below the silence of Gnar's mind. The great laws are unequivocal. If he were to do what the strongest part of him was driving him to do, he would be himself a lawbreaker. The bodies of the dead are holy, never to be touched in any but the ritual ways. *Yet when we give the body to the earth the spirit abandons it, flies westward with the soul of the spear and the soul of the drinking horn. . . .*

If a man dies by the hand of an ordinary enemy, that enemy must be found. But what if, to do this, one must break another law?

Gnar fought with himself till the Moon-Spirit had changed from golden to white. Then he called softly, in simple speech: "Cogan! Cogan! Wake Ducam-the-Dreamer to take your watch and come here to me."

The big man appeared, puzzled but ready. Gnar studied him, shrinking from a decision that could never be recalled. "Cogan, friend — witness what I must do, and do not prevent me. If Camgar strikes me down, then take my place and see that the watching is completed."

He moved Morg's body face down across his thighs; trembling, he spread the bones and forced out the wooden fragment. Its end was a flint, small beyond reason, shaped like a spearhead, grooved like a spearhead to

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take the shaft. Cogan groaned. Gnar said harshly: "What is sorcery?"

"They are all around us," Cogan whispered. "What have you done?"

"I have done what I must. And I still live, Cogan. Stay with me."

"I will stay, Old Man."

Later, Gnar called Croma-Who-Speaks-Softly and said to her: "Go among the caves; ask if any woman has lost a necklace of painted clay, perhaps five and five suns ago."

When she returned to tell him there had been no such loss, he said: "You are good and useful, Croma. Take your rest."

Much later in the long night Gnar murmured: "It is on you, Cogan, to oversee the feasting. When this watching is done I must go away. I will return before the dances. Or if I do not return at all, leadership is with you, a second brother to me, a respecter of the laws."

The second Light-That-Wakes ended the watching: Gnar went away. At high-sun of the same day he returned from the north, following the stream below the cliff, with the Singing Stick and the bundle in wolf-hide.

When he had left the caves at Light-That-Wakes, the boy Kofar had followed; Gnar had seen him, ordered him back with horrid-looking shakings of the spear. The children should be at the burial-grounds, grabbing scraps from the ceremonial feast, keeping out of the way; and no child should ever go alone below the cliffs. But now Kofar-the-Speechless was crouching on a boulder in the brook, pretending invisibility. Gnar growled. Invisibility failing him, Kofar continued to suck his thumb.

Croma hurried from the cliffside path, distracted. "Old Man, my fourth journey after him. Each time I look around he —" Kofar's matted hair gave a fine purchase. He could not speak, but he could howl.

Gnar howled too, letting the laugh ease the pain in him. Even Croma smiled, rubbing tears of exasperation. Gnar's laugh died; he dreaded the feasting that must go on till twilight — his belly would reject it. Worse, he was not ready for what he must do. His search had found its object, but a gap in his knowledge tortured him. "Croma, leave the child with me. He is troublesome; you have much to do; I will watch out for him. Go back, and tell no one — no one, Croma — that I have returned. I will be at the burial grounds for the dances."

"Understood."

"Is all going well at the feasting?"

"As well as may be when Gnar is not there."

There was wisdom, he thought, in the laws that allowed women to speak sometimes in this way. "It is well. Now leave the child with me."

There was flat ground between the brook and the base of the cliff. An oak gave shade and the grass was warm. Respectfully, Kofar chewed his thumb.

It had been easy, that remembered trail from the spot where Morg had died. It led to a narrow part of the

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river which was not hard to cross, and continued under the pines on the far side — a trail made not by a sorcerer but by a man whose feet must disturb the ground and leave dim mud-spots on the rock.

Even the hiding-place of the Singing Stick, halfway to the north ford, was plain — irregularities at the foot of a tall pine, a pale mark where a hand, not a claw, had dislodged a flake of bark, an edge of the wolf-hide not quite concealed in a crotch. When first stolen, no doubt the things had been hidden more carefully, or Morg would have recovered them. After he died, perhaps his murderer had had only contempt for lesser men.

The wolf-hide held other sticks, as Morca had said: four of ash, one of oak, three of pine. Gnar laid them on the grass with the Singing Stick and its thong, motioning Kofar away. Each stick was flint-headed, the flints not too carefully made — Morg had never had great skill in that art, lacking the patience. One had an end whittled flat; six were unaltered from the original cut; one pine stick had three wing-feathers of a hawk bound to it with thin deer-hide. The flint on this feathered stick had marks of dry blood in the chipped hollows.

Gnar tried throwing the sticks at the oak. Impossibly light. "Bring them back to me, Kofar." Kofar loved the game. . . .

The one with the whittled end hit the trunk cleanly and clung, but fell before Kofar could touch it. The feathered one revolved, dropping more gradually at the flint end, but it was erratic, hard to aim. True, Morg's arm had been stronger. But how could such trifles kill?

Gnar put the sticks back in the wolf-hide, seeing Kofar's mouth wobble in disappointment. Well, if Morg had told his woman not to fear the noise of the thong, perhaps it could also keep a child from squalling. He fitted the feathered stick to the Singing Stick, as he had seen his brother do, and he plucked the thong. Kofar was white-eyed with awe, too delighted even to scratch. A drum-sound, Gnar thought: darkly soft, yet not magic — a natural thing like the hurry of water over stones. A sound to please a child.

He unfastened the thong, astonished again at the strength needed for bending the Stick. "Kofar, do you know what a sentinel is?" The boy nodded violently. "Stand watch then; wake me at any least danger. Kofar, a sentinel who fails in his duty is thrown to the wolves. Understand?" Kofar-the-Speechless nodded. Gnar wondered. He would sleep of course with ears awake, hand on spear. He lay with his chest sheltering the little sticks and the Singing Stick. "Kofar, wake me when Light-God-Too-Bright-To-See is above the cliff." The boy agreed again, serious and proud. Gnar was touched by tenderness, observing the stern, pot-bellied pose. And then he sank to a deeper world. . . .

Gnar woke, angered at the lateness — it was twilight; angered to see the

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boy twenty paces away, back turned. Gnar stood up quietly, meaning to steal up and administer a discipline that Kofar would remember into late manhood. But he halted.

Alone, thwarted, bored, incorrigibly squirrel-minded, Kofar had found a short branch of ash and made his own Singing Stick, strung with a cord of braided grass. He squatted by the brook, gravely placing pebbles in the center of the cord, drawing the cord back, snapping the pebbles into the water with a happy clunk. As Gnar watched, Kofar tried the action of a long twig instead of a pebble; it flew merrily over the brook and parted the grass on the other side. . . .

They waited for Gnar at the burial ground; not gorged, for this feasting was ritual. Tomorrow would be feasting of another sort. Gnar had felt heavily old as he climbed the path, sending Kofar ahead. He slapped the little rump, murmuring: "You may be a man in a few summers. Now go to your brown-eyed mother."

The women and children were in a group, but Morca sat apart, head on her knees. She was ritually clean; she should have been with the others. Ducam-the-Dreamer knelt by the drum-log, but Gnar gave no sign. At the edge of bare ground, Sunis-the-Singer and Dunifor-the-Stumbler had made the grave: the seven rocks stood ready to be placed three at the north, three at the south, one at the east, leaving the western side free. The body of Morg-of-the-Hump waited, clothed in leopard-skin, for a part of his journey would be cold. Gnar saw the spear and the drinking horn.

"Suchin," he said informally, "stand there." He pointed to a place on the open ground. "Mas, son of Camo, stand three paces from him. Mani — there." One of them, he knew, might not have obeyed him but for the silent will of the tribe. Gnar tossed his spear to the ground. He raised the Singing Stick, tense with its thong, and the feathered stick, its best servant. "Suchin-of-the-Hairy-Back, you challenged me once."

"I challenged according to the laws. I accepted defeat."

Gnar drew back the thong. As he had learned from trials in the last hour of twilight, the feathered stick took from the thong a life of its own, quivering, mad for release. "When you hunted in the north, you were apart from the others, not far from our valley. On the second night of that hunting in the north, my brother was slain."

"And the others were apart from me," said Suchin.

"Do you accuse them, or one of them?"

"I know nothing of it. What toy is that, Old Man? Do you threaten me with magic? I had no hand in the death of the wise man."

Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms let the thong relax. "Go back among the others. Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth, you challenged at an improper time."

"The time was wrong," Mas admitted. "Not the challenge."

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"It is dangerous to challenge the wise. Camgar the Great has given me part of my brother's wisdom, Mas, using the hands of a dumb child. He has shown me the soul of this device, made by my brother, and called by him the Singing Stick. By this my brother himself was killed. Mas, this Stick is death. And it smells out truth like a wise man, yet it is not sorcery."

Mas chuckled. "Riddles for women around a comfortable fire."

"Go back among the others."

This was the moment Gnar had feared, ever since the evening when the three returned and told of the hunt: the moment when there could be only bleak truth between him and Mani-Who-Smiles. He did not draw back the cord. "Mani, I am old but not blind. Did the little doe flee *toward you*, Mani, so your spear could find her throat? No, you stalked her; you whistled to make her freeze, facing you, searching for you in the grass. Then the feathered servant of the Stick drew back, like this —"

"It was for the tribe!" Mani screamed. "Morg should have given the Stick to the tribe. I took it for the tribe —"

"And hid it in the pines, carelessly, thinking: 'Now the strength of Morg-of-the-Hump is in me — the rest are children and old women.' My brother would have given this to the tribe in his own time, in his own fashion. As I do now. As I show its use —"

Mani ran stumbling. Gnar lifted the Singing Stick, plucked quickly. The flint entered Mani's back, as one had stricken Morg; he fell as Morg had fallen; after a while he lay still.

There was only one who cried out and started toward him; she stopped, and hid her face again. Camo-Followed-by-the-Hawk had not cried out, but made dry sounds like laughter, mirthless and vague. Gnar said: "The law demands that his body be thrown over the cliff to the wolves."

There was an emptiness of time, no one moving. Then Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth lifted the body in his arms. He crossed to the place where the path went down to the caves. Gnar said for his ears only: "A challenge may be withdrawn before blood, without shame."

Mas said: "Let me pass."

"Are you to meet me after the dances?"

"I do not know. Let me pass, Old Man."

Gnar-of-the-Long-Arms stood aside.

There was the Dance of the Breaking of Bonds. Mas-Watcher-of-Mammoth did not return for his part in it. The hours passed.

There was the Dance of False Offering, when the north wind Sruhurr, in the form of a mask on the body of Dashim-the-Chatterer, foolishly accepted an image of bundled grass in place of the dead man's true spirit. The drum then spoke with a louder courage.

There was the Dance of Enticement. A leopard-woman of the Homeless-Wandering, acting in the body of

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Suchin's woman, was to meet a mimic death from mimic spears of bright-cloud spirits. Seeing that Morca-of-the-Thin-Flanks did not rouse herself for this, Gnar went to stand over her and ask softly: "Was there ever a necklace?"

She did not look up. "I threw it in the river."

"When?"

"When Morg-of-the-Hump had died, and I knew the slayer."

"It did not come from the sky, but from a youth skilled in warm words. Perhaps he left you sleeping in the sun when he stole —"

Morca whimpered in the dark. "Your spear knows what to do."

"He came often, watching, hiding, searching out my brother's secrets when you thought he came only for you."

"I was — much alone. . . ."

The Old Man Samar would not have hesitated. Gnar thought: *Can there be times when the laws themselves must change?* And this thought was more terrible to him than the death of a brother; but he said: "It can be forgiven. The law is in me. You will work at whatever is required of you, obey my needs, live as the other women do. You will respect the laws."

That thought burned in him as he spoke the Invocation, calling the south wind to quiet the gray water for his brother. In time, it was Light-That-Wakes. The dances were completed. . . .

A thin finger of morning touched the ledge in the cave where Gnar had placed the Nameless Image. In shadow was the bison of the swinging head; he took no pleasure in it. But there was a strength in the Image, so incomprehensibly old. Made by Men-Here-Before-Us — who could grasp such antiquity as that? "*It tells me, Gnar, that even gods die or go away. . . .*"

Gnar went unwillingly where one could look down and see what the wolves had left. But the grass was unmarked, except by a new trail of a man crossing the valley to the ford. Gnar descended the cliff wearily, to follow this trail — drowsy, knowing something of the end of it, but not all.

The trail was that of a man heavily burdened, who had crossed the ford and gone on, still burdened, until a turn of the river put the pines between him and the cliffside caves. Here, hidden in a clearing, there was troubled earth, and the seven stones, open on the westward side. The trail continued — the lighter steps of a man hunting a new living-place.

Gnar sat a while in the early sun. *The laws change. But the laws also endure: that is my part — the part of the Old Man, the leader of the tribe . . .*

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THE OLD LADY OF BAYEUX

by GEORGES SIMENON

(translated by Anthony Boucher)

"SIT DOWN, MADEMOISELLE." MAIgret sighed as he regretfully set aside his pipe.

And he again looked at the prosecutor's note and read, "A family matter. Please hear what Cécile Ledru has to say; but observe the utmost discretion in acting on it."

This was at Caen, in the period when Maigret had been sent down there to reorganize the district constabulary. He could not get used to this grasping, secretive Norman province; he felt hampered, confined, and missed the freedom of action he had enjoyed in Paris.

This note, for instance: "A family matter . . . the utmost discretion. . . ." Did this mean he was once more going to run up against the family of some high official or important personage of the district? It was incredible how many provincial big guns had cousins and brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law who had to be handled gently by the police!

"I'm listening, Mademoiselle Ledru."

She was something to look at, this Mademoiselle Cécile, almost too good-looking — an effect heightened by the mourning which poetically emphasized her naturally pale complexion.

"Your age?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Profession?"

"I suppose it would be best to explain everything to you, so that you can understand my position. I was an orphan, and I started out in life, at the age of fifteen, as a maid of all work. I was still wearing pigtails, and I didn't know how to read or write."

Maigret suppressed his astonishment. This was an amazing beginning for one who now possessed so marked an air of distinction.

"Please go on."

"I happened to secure employment with Madame Croizier, at Bayeux. You've heard of her?"

"I confess I haven't." These provincials! Always assuming that the whole world knows their local characters!

"I'll tell you more about her later. She became very fond of me. She induced me to study and make something of myself. Then she kept me with her, no longer as a servant, but as a companion. She asked me to call her Aunt Joséphine."

"So you live in Bayeux with Madame Joséphine Croizier?"

The girl's eyes clouded over with tears. "That's all over now," she said, drying her eyes with a handkerchief. "Aunt Joséphine died yesterday, here in Caen. That's why I came to see you. To tell you about the murder and —"

"Just a moment! You're sure that Madame Croizier was murdered?"

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"I swear it."

"You were there?"

"No."

"Someone told you?"

"My aunt herself!"

"I beg your pardon? Your aunt *told* you that she had been murdered?"

"Please, Inspector! I am not suffering from delusions; I know very well what I'm saying. My aunt has told me time and again that if anything should happen to her in the house in the Rue des Récollets, my first duty should be to demand an investigation into —"

"Just a moment. What is this 'house in the Rue de Récollets'?"

"The home of her nephew, Philippe Deligeard. Aunt Joséphine had come to Caen for several weeks to have her teeth attended to. At 68, she was having trouble with them for the first time. She was staying with her nephew, and I had remained at Bayeux because Philippe doesn't care for me at all."

On a scrap of paper Maigret jotted down *Philippe Deligeard*. "How old is this nephew?"

"Forty-four or five."

"Profession?"

"He has none. He had a fortune — his wife's — but I believe that for several years that fortune has been only a memory. Nevertheless, he still keeps up a large house in the Rue des Récollets, with cook, butler, and chauffeur. Philippe often came to Bayeux to beg his aunt to lend him money."

"And did she?"

"Never! She used to tell her nephew he had only to be patient and wait for her death."

As the young woman talked on, Maigret mentally arranged one of his habitual résumés:

First of all, there lived in Bayeux, in one of those quiet streets near the cathedral where the sound of a footstep makes the curtains tremble in every window, a Madame Joséphine Croizier, widow of Justin Croizier.

Now the story of her fortune was at once macabre and droll. Croizier, a mere law clerk when he married, was a monomaniac on the subject of insurance. His hobby was to spend his time signing policies with every possible company, to the scornful amusement of all concerned.

For the first and last time in his life, he took the boat to Southampton. It was a rough crossing. A lurch of the ship hurled him against a bulkhead and cracked his skull open; his widow, shortly thereafter, was astonished to receive a million francs from divers insurance companies.

From that time on Joséphine Croizier's only amusements, in her gloomy house in Bayeux, were to look after this constantly growing fortune and to spend whole afternoons chatting with her protégée, Cécile Ledru. She succeeded so well in the first of these occupations that she was rumored to be worth four or five million francs.

Her sister's son, Philippe Deligeard, had started off elegantly by marrying the daughter of a rich dealer

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in horses. He had furnished a magnificent mansion, renowned as one of the show-places of Caen. But his investments had proved as unfortunate as his aunt's had been lucky; and it was rumored that he had been living for three or four years on credit, borrowing money at high interest against his future inheritance from his aunt.

"In short, Mademoiselle Cécile, the only serious basis for your accusation is that Philippe needed money badly, and his aunt's death provides him with it?"

"I already told you that Madame Croizier herself always said that if she should die in the Rue des Récollets—"

"Pardon me, but you must know how much the fears of old ladies are worth as evidence. Now, about the actual facts of the case?"

"My aunt died yesterday, around five in the afternoon. They're trying to claim that she had a heart attack!"

"Did she have heart trouble?"

"Nothing to die of."

"Were you in Bayeux at this time?"

It seemed to Maigret, though it might have been a misleading impression, that the young lady showed a certain hesitation in answering.

"No. . . . I was here in Caen."

"I thought that you had not accompanied Joséphine Croizier on this trip?"

"That's right. But by bus it's only a half-hour from Bayeux to Caen. I came in to do a little shopping."

"And you didn't try to see your aunt, as you call her?"

"I stopped by the house in the Rue des Récollets."

"At what time?"

"Around four. They told me that Madame Croizier had gone out."

"Who told you that?"

"The butler."

"After asking his employers?"

"No. On his own."

"Then we must believe either that it was true, or that he'd been given his instructions beforehand."

"That's what I thought."

"Then where did you go?"

"Downtown. I had a lot of little things to do. Then I went back to Bayeux, and this morning, when I read the Caen paper, I learned of my aunt's death."

"Curious. . . ."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say it's curious. At four in the afternoon, when you call in the Rue des Récollets, you're told that your aunt is out. You go back to Bayeux, and the next morning you learn in the paper that your aunt died only a few minutes, an hour at most, after your visit. Is it correct that you've requested a police investigation, Mademoiselle Cécile?"

"Yes, Inspector. I haven't any fortune; but I'd gladly give the little I have to discover the truth and punish the guilty."

"Just a moment. Speaking of the state of your finances, may I ask if you stand to inherit from Joséphine Croizier?"

"I'm certain that I shan't. I myself drew up her will, and I positively re-

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fused to accept anything whatsoever. Otherwise no one would have believed how truly disinterested my affection has been, during the years which I have devoted to my benefactress."

She was almost too good to be true. Seek as he would, Maigret could not find the chink in her armor. "So you're left without a penny?"

"I didn't say that, Inspector. I received a salary as Madame Croizier's companion. Since I had no expenses, I was able to put away a nice little nest egg which will see me through for a while — though I'm willing to spend every sou of it to avenge my aunt."

"May I ask one more question? Philippe is the heir, isn't he? Now supposing it's proved he killed his aunt — then he won't be allowed to inherit. What will become of the millions?"

"They will go to institutions for the protection of young girls."

"Madame Croizier was interested in that sort of charity?"

"She felt a pity for young girls who live alone; she knew the dangers that surround them. . . ."

"She was very strait-laced"?

Cécile hesitated a moment, thinking it over. "Very much so."

"A trifle fanatical on the subject?"

"Almost. . . ."

"Thank you, Mademoiselle."

"You are going to make an investigation, aren't you?"

"I'll check up on the situation, and if it seems necessary . . . By the way, where can I find you?"

"My aunt's body is lying in the house in the Rue des Récollets. Until the funeral — that will be two days from now, here in Caen — I'll be there with her most of the time."

"In spite of Philippe?"

"We don't speak to each other, and I don't so much as set foot in the rest of the house. I pray and I cry a little. . . . At night, I'm staying at the Hotel Saint-Georges."

Maigret finished his pipe while his little eyes studied the enormous gray house, the carriage gate with its copper ring, the ornate entrance court with its bronze candelabras.

It was almost twenty-four hours since the girl's visit. It had taken Maigret that long to clear up enough of the details of his reorganization to allow him to take charge of the investigation in person; any other Inspector in Caen, he feared, might take the Prosecutor's request for discretion too seriously. And discretion and all, he felt in his bones that this was going to be his kind of case — even though he had a sinking feeling that it would be what he called a No-Pipe Case — an investigation conducted in scenes of such respectability that the Inspector could not decently keep his hay-burner in his mouth.

That was why he stole a few last puffs before going in, watching the people who came and went: ladies in black, gentlemen formally garbed — all of the haute bourgeoisie of Caen, in short, come to pay their respects.

"This'll be a cheerful party!" he sighed as he finally tapped his pipe

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against his heel. And he went in like the rest, passed by the silver tray full of visiting cards, reached the end of a blue-and-white tiled hall, and beheld, beyond a large door draped with black, the coffin — surrounded by flowers, by candles, by black silhouettes, standing and kneeling.

The odor of burning wax and chrysanthemums was in itself enough to establish the atmosphere. Then the whisperings, the handkerchiefs dabbing at the mourning nostrils, that great air of dignity which people assume only before justice and death. . . .

Cécile Ledru was there in a corner, kneeling on a prie-dieu, her face covered by a black veil transparent enough to reveal her composed features, and the movement of her lips as the beads of a jade rosary slipped through her fingers.

A man clad all in black, his eyes reddened, his features distorted, kept watching Maigret as though wondering what right he had there. The Inspector went up to him. "Monsieur Philippe Deligeard? I'm Inspector Maigret. If you could let me see you alone for a moment. . . ."

Maigret had the impression that the man cast a nasty look at the girl before leaving the black-draped room. "Come with me, monsieur. My office is on the next floor."

A marble staircase with a beautiful iron railing. On the wall of the landing, a genuine Aubusson tapestry. Then an enormous office, with Empire furnishings, whose three windows opened on a park larger than seemed possible here in the midst of the city.

"Please sit down. I imagine that girl is still continuing her machinations and that I owe the pleasure of this visit to her?"

"You refer to Mademoiselle Cécile Ledru?"

"I do indeed refer to that conspirator from below stairs who contrived, for a brief space of time, to exert an undue and unfortunate influence upon my aunt. A cigar?"

"No, thank you. You say 'for a brief space of time.' Should I take it that this influence didn't last?"

Maigret had no need to study Philippe Deligeard closely. Elegantly dressed even in his mourning, he was the perfect type to be found in every provincial city: the rich bourgeois, keeping up an impressive establishment, insisting above all on decorum, on the precise cut of clothes, the telling details of speech and manner that distinguished him from the common run of mortals.

"You understand, Inspector, how extremely painful, not to say disagreeable, it is to me to receive, in such sorrowful moments, the visit of a policeman. Nevertheless, I shall answer your questions. I want this affair to be cleared up, and I want to see Cécile receive the punishment which she so well deserves."

"Which is . . . ?"

"As your previous question proves, you understand that my aunt was not ultimately deceived by the hypocritical manners of that girl nor by

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her supposedly disinterested devotion. As evidence I may adduce the fact that when my aunt came to spend a month with us here, we suggested that she might bring her companion with her; the house is large enough. And she flatly refused, telling us in confidence that she had had enough of the girl and was looking for a way to get rid of her. All that she feared was that, if she broke off the relationship too brutally, Cécile might try to seek some revenge."

Maigret could not help it. It was the general atmosphere that forced him to murmur, with an irony which his host overlooked, "How wicked and deceitful people are!"

"Sooner or later, therefore, my aunt would have made a clean break with this creature, who had even tried to cause trouble between my aunt and me."

"She did?"

"Claiming, among other things, that I had mistresses. Now as man to man, Inspector, you'll admit that at my age and in my situation it's natural to . . . oh, discreetly, of course! like any man of the world. . . . But of course my poor aunt, with her fixation on purity, couldn't understand that. You can't talk with old people about this sort of thing."

"Cécile told her?"

"How else could my aunt have learned it? But it was an unwise move; that treacherous girl saw her own maneuver rebound against her. When my aunt learned that her chaste companion was receiving, under her very roof, secret visits from a young man of whom the least that can be said is that his family is not of the best . . ."

"Cécile had a lover?" If Maigret's indignation was not actual, it was admirably played. And he took advantage of it to slip his pipe from his pocket with the most innocent air, as though he had completely forgotten the sumptuous décor which surrounded him and the Havana cigars awaiting him on the desk.

"For the last two years! It's two years now that they've been meeting almost every night. His name is Jacques Mercier. He and a friend have some sort of transportation business. And it's worth observing that his parents went through bankruptcy several years ago."

"Would you believe it! And you told this to your aunt?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I? Wasn't it my duty?"

"Naturally."

"That was when my aunt finally made up her mind to get rid of Cécile. But the fear of some attempt at revenge still made her hesitate. That's why I suggested to my aunt that she should henceforth stay with us. I would have placed the entire second floor of our home at her disposal."

"And when were these questions discussed?"

"Why . . . the day before yesterday. . . ."

"And a decision was reached?"

"Not formally. But the principle was established."

"Nevertheless, I don't imagine that

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you'd accuse Cécile of having murdered your aunt?"

Philippe lifted his head abruptly and looked at Maigret with utter astonishment. "But there's no question of murder! That girl must be as insane as she is vicious if she's been telling you such absurd fantasies. My aunt died of a heart attack. The medical examiner expressly stated as much in his certificate."

"In short, you do not accuse Cécile of the murder of your aunt?"

"I certainly would if I were not sure that my aunt had died a natural death. As it is, however, if this girl continues to spread such stories about us, I shall be forced to bring suit against her for slander."

"One question, Monsieur Deligeard: Your aunt died around five o'clock, didn't she?"

"A few minutes after five, yes. Or so my wife tells me; I was not here myself."

"All right. Now, around four o'clock, Joséphine Croizier was not in this house?"

"Every day at four she had an appointment with her dentist. She was having several bridges fitted — a long and difficult job."

"Do you know what time your aunt came back to the house?"

"Around five, they tell me. It was almost immediately after her return that she had the attack; she died before anyone could do anything for her."

"The attack happened in her bedroom?"

"Yes. The Louis XIV room on the second floor."

"Your wife was up there with her?"

"She went up as soon as my aunt opened her door and called for help."

"May I ask where you were?"

"I imagine, Inspector, that these questions are not part of a formal investigation? That, I warn you, I will not tolerate."

"Of course not. This is just so we can prove to that nuisance of a girl that there's nothing to investigate."

"Ah . . . Certainly. . . . I must have been at my club. I generally leave here around four thirty or quarter of five, and walk through the city to get a little exercise. Around five I settle down to bridge, and at seven thirty the car comes to bring me home for dinner."

"You received the news by telephone at your club?"

"Exactly."

"And when you got home. . . ?"

"My aunt was dead and the doctor was already here."

"Your family doctor?"

"No; he lives too far away. My wife called a doctor in the neighborhood; but it was too late for him to do anything."

"The servants?"

"Arsène, the chauffeur, had the day off. The butler is on duty on the main floor all afternoon. The cook must, I imagine, have been in the kitchen. Now is there anything more that you would like to know, Inspector? I owe a duty to those who have come to offer me their condolences,

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and I am expecting at any moment the presiding judge, who is also president of my club. I think the best thing that you can do is to give that girl a good warning. If she continues to spread these vile stories, I'll have a warrant out against her."

Philippe Deligeard must have wondered what could have caused, in so solemn a moment, the odd smile on Maigret's lips. The Inspector had, for some moments, been staring at the mirror over the fireplace, which reflected a curtained doorway. The curtain had moved several times, and once the Inspector had glimpsed a pale face which could belong only to Madame Deligeard. He could not help speculating whether she had overheard her husband's man-to-man exposition of the life of a man-of-the-world.

"Good day, Inspector. I dare hope that after these explanations which I have taken the trouble to make, my mourning will no longer be disturbed by this stupid and indecent fiction. The butler will show you out."

Philippe rang, nodded curtly to the policeman, and moved off with dignified strides toward the curtained doorway.

A quarter of an hour later Maigret sat in the office of the Prosecutor for the Republic — a placid and ironic Maigret, regretfully fingering his pipe in his pocket; for the Caen Prosecutor was not a man to allow smoking in his office.

"Well, Inspector? You heard the girl's story?"

"I also visited the scene of the death."

"What's your opinion? A lot of nonsense, isn't it?"

"On the contrary, I have the feeling that this poor old lady Joséphine Croizier was assisted on her way out of this world. But by whom? That's the question. . . . And there's one other question: Do you really want to find out?"

The Hotel Saint-Georges was one of those little residence hotels which exist in every city — the hotels you never hear of unless someone sends you there, the hotels whose tenants are old people, priests, fanatically devout girls, in short everyone remotely connected with pious devotion, from beadles to candle manufacturers.

The lobby was furnished with rattan chairs. Maigret had been waiting there a good half-hour. An old lady looked up from her embroidery from time to time to cast a glance of suspicious severity at the Inspector, as the smoke of his pipe drifted up to form a bluish halo around the chandelier.

"You, my fine fellow, are waiting for the same person as I am," Maigret had wagered as soon as he saw a young man pacing up and down the lobby and consulting his watch at one-minute intervals.

Now, after a half-hour's wait, the two men had come to know each other without exchanging a word. As the young man surveyed Maigret

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from head to foot, his thoughts were self-evident: "So this is the famous Inspector whom Cécile was talking about! He looks harmless enough . . . plump, good-natured. . . . But there must be some news, since he's looked up Cécile at the hotel."

And for his part Maigret was thinking, "Not bad, this young Jacques Mercier! Quite a boy, in fact — maybe a little too much so. Not at all the proper young provincial. Looks as if he might have ideas of his own. Good features, wavy hair, bright eyes, fire in his veins. . . . Aha! Mademoiselle Cécile! It looks to me as if you liked contrasts, and as if your prudence might be a bit less pronounced at night."

When she came in, she first saw Jacques Mercier, and a smile lit up her face. But the young man pointed to the Inspector, and she came up to him frowning.

"You want to talk to me?" she asked. She did not seem pleased to meet Maigret in her lover's presence.

"I'd like to straighten out a few small matters. But this doesn't seem to me to be quite the right place. This hotel's so quiet you can hear the moths buzzing. Wouldn't you like to go out to a café for a moment?"

Cécile looked at Mercier. He nodded, and a little later the three of them were sitting in a bar, with a billiard game going on next to them.

"First of all, let me point out, Mademoiselle Cécile, that it wasn't very nice of you not to mention Monsieur Mercier to me."

"I felt he had nothing to do with the case; but I should have known Philippe would tell you all about him. What else did he say about me?"

"Very nasty things, as you might guess. I believe he's what they call a perfect man of the world, but he has a very sharp tongue. One beer, waiter! What are you drinking, Mademoiselle? Port? You too? Two ports."

Maigret relaxed on the moleskin banquette, his eyes mechanically following the billiard balls. As he smoked in little voluptuous puffs, he seemed to be savoring the gray pervasive peace of provincial life.

"So this has been going on for two years?"

"It's two years since we met, if that's what you mean."

"And how long has it been since Monsieur Mercier fell into the habit of spending his nights in the old lady's house?"

"Over a year. . . ."

"It never occurred to you to get married?"

"The old lady, as you call her, would never have allowed it. Or rather, she would have regarded it as an act of treason against her. She was jealous of my affection. There was nobody else in her life but nephews whom she loathed; so she looked on me as the one thing belonging to her. It was for her sake that I concealed my relationship with Jacques, so as not to hurt her feelings."

She answered Maigret's questions docilely enough, while her companion occasionally raised his eyebrows, as

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though to suggest a trifle more discretion.

"Your turn, Monsieur Mercier."

"I don't see how I'm involved in —"

"Nobody's trying to involve you. Mademoiselle Cécile has asked the police to do a job, and you can help by answering questions. Philippe Deligeard asserts that your business isn't doing well. Is that true?"

"Well . . ."

"Is it true?"

"Answer him, Jacques!"

"It's true enough. I went into business with a friend, and we bought three used trucks to transport fish from the little ports on the Channel. Unfortunately, the trucks turned out to be in pretty bad shape, and what with all the repairs and —"

"When's it due?"

"When's what due?"

"Your going out of business?"

"The trucks haven't run for three days now, because the garage rent isn't paid."

"Thank you. Now Mademoiselle, would you tell me again what time you reached the Rue des Récollets?"

"Day before yesterday? Around four . . . wasn't it, Jacques?"

"I beg your pardon; you were with her?"

"I brought her in my car and waited at the corner. It must have been five after four."

"You drove her from Bayeux?" Maigret looked severely at Cécile, who had told him she came by bus. "All right. Now tell me, mademoiselle: when you learned of Joséphine Croizier's death from the paper, I imagine you asked Mercier to drive you back to Caen. What time did you reach the Rue des Récollets?"

"Around nine thirty in the morning."

"Then the old lady had been dead for a whole night. Will you tell me precisely what you saw?"

"What do you mean? First I saw the butler, then some men in the great hall, then Philippe Deligeard who came up to me and sneered, 'I thought you'd come running!' Then I saw my aunt —"

"One moment. This is the part that interests me. You saw your aunt's body. Where?"

"In the coffin."

"So it was already in the coffin, but the lid hadn't been closed yet?"

"They closed it a little later. I saw them. The men I'd met in the hall were from the funeral parlor."

"So you recognized your aunt's face? You're certain of that?"

"Absolutely! What on earth are you thinking of?"

"You didn't notice anything abnormal?"

"Of course not. I was crying. . . . I was very upset. . . . I should have liked to be alone with her a little, but that wasn't possible. . . ."

"One last question: I know the main entrance to the house in the Rue des Récollets. But I imagine there must be another?"

"There's a little door in the rear, on the Rue de l'Echaudé. That's more of an alley than a street; there aren't

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any houses facing on it, just garden walls."

"If you go in by this door, can you get into the upper part of the house without going near the butler or the cook?"

"Yes. You take what they call the staircase; it leads to the second floor."

"How much do I owe you, waiter? Thank you, Mademoiselle. And you too, Monsieur Mercier."

Maigret paid the bill and rose, more cheerful than the circumstances seemed to indicate.

A few minutes later, his pipe still in his mouth, he had entered Deligeard's club and made his way into the secretary's office. There he asked a number of questions and jotted down the answers detailedly in his notebook, with an ever-growing air of satisfaction.

"Now let me read this summary back to you. You say that you're certain you saw Philippe Deligeard arrive day before yesterday at five fifteen . . . that's right? His three usual partners were waiting for him to round out the bridge game that regularly started at five. He took his place at the table. As soon as the cards were dealt he was called to the telephone. When he left the booth, he'd turned very pale, and announced that his aunt had just died at his home. . . . That's all; you can't think of anything more to add? Thank you. Good day, monsieur."

And Maigret shrugged his shoulders as he crossed through the solemn rooms where sad old men, sunk into the depths of their armchairs, dozed behind the screens of their newspapers.

Dr. Liévin, the neighborhood doctor who had been called in too late, was a very young man with bright red hair. He wore a white coat and was at the moment engaged in broiling a chop over the gas stove in his consulting room.

"Am I disturbing you, Doctor? You'll forgive me, but I need a few details concerning the death of Madame Croizier."

Liévin was a bare twenty-seven. He had just begun to practice in Caen; and to judge from his office, he was not yet overburdened with patients.

"I suppose, first of all, that you are the nearest doctor to the Deligeards' house?"

"Almost. I think I have a colleague in the Rue des Minimes."

"Had you had any previous occasion to be called in by M. Deligeard?"

"Never. As you realized when you came in, I've just begun my practice here and I don't have many patients. It was quite a surprise to me to be called in to one of the finest homes in the city."

"What time was it? Can you fix the time exactly?"

"With the most rigorous precision," Liévin smiled. "I have a little nurse who comes in every afternoon for my consultation hours; she leaves at five o'clock. She had just put on her hat and I was in the very act of kissing her when the phone rang."

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"So it was five exactly. How long did it take you to reach the Rue des Récollets?"

"Seven or eight minutes."

"The butler let you in and took you up to the second floor?"

"No, not exactly. The butler opened the door, but all at once a woman leaned over the staircase and called down, 'Come quickly, Doctor!' It was Madame Deligeard, and she herself showed me into the bedroom on the right —"

"Just a minute. The bedroom on the right . . . that would be a room with light blue hangings?"

"You're mistaken, Inspector. The room on the right is papered, not hung. Wall paper with yellow circles."

"Louis XIV furniture?"

"Pardon me. I know a little about periods, and I can state positively that the room on the right is Regency."

To the doctor's astonishment, Maigret wrote all these apparently insignificant details down in his notebook. "All right. You're upstairs and it's about five ten. Where's the body?"

"On the bed, of course."

"Undressed?"

"Naturally."

"I beg your pardon. This was at five ten, and Joséphine Croizier was undressed. What was she wearing?"

"A night gown and a robe."

"Outer clothing lying around?"

"I don't think so. . . . No; everything neat and in order."

"And no one there but Madame Deligeard?"

"Yes. She was extremely nervous. She described her aunt's attack; I realized that death must have been practically instantaneous. Nevertheless, I examined the dead woman and found that she had been in a greatly weakened condition; this must have been at least her tenth attack."

"Could you determine approximately the time of death?"

"That's automatic. . . . Within a minute or two, I'd place the death at four fifteen."

The doctor recoiled in astonishment as Maigret leaped up and seized him by the shoulders. "What? Four fifteen?"

"Why, yes. Madame Deligeard made no secret of the fact that she'd tried to get hold of two other doctors before falling back on me. That takes some time —"

"Four fifteen!" Maigret repeated, rubbing his brow. "I don't want to offend you, Doctor, but . . . you're new at the game . . . are you positive of what you're saying? Would you persist in this statement if a man's life were at stake?"

"I could only repeat —"

"All right. I believe you. But I ought to warn you that you'll almost certainly have to repeat this statement in court, and the lawyers'll do everything they can to break your testimony."

"They won't succeed."

"Have you anything else to tell me? What happened next?"

"Nothing. I signed the death certificate. Mme. Deligeard insisted on

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paying me on the spot and gave me two hundred francs."

"Is that your usual fee?"

"Hardly. It was her idea; I didn't argue. She went with me halfway downstairs. The butler opened the door for me."

"And you didn't meet anyone else?"

"Not a soul."

Through the windows of the little house Maigret could see the family at dinner. "It can't be helped," he muttered, as he interrupted the domestic scene by pressing the doorbell.

The medical examiner was a little old man, half-deaf, still holding his napkin in his hand. He led Maigret into an office reeking of cabbage soup and ringing with the clatter of knives and forks from the dining-room.

"Did you know Monsieur and Madame Deligeard before you were called in to certify their aunt's death officially?"

"I've vaguely noticed Monsieur Deligeard around town. After all, he's a prominent man. But we didn't move in the same circles."

"When did you go to the house?"

"The city hall notified me around six thirty. I reached the Rue des Récollets before seven."

"You knew Madame Croizier?"

"No. The butler asked me to wait while he announced me to his master. Then Monsieur Deligeard took me up to the second floor and into a room done all in yellow —"

"You're sure it was a yellow room?"

"Absolutely. It struck me because my daughter wants a yellow room and my wife insists it isn't the right thing. I found that the old lady had died of a heart attack and I filled out the usual forms."

"She was undressed?"

"In her night clothes."

"No disorder in the room?"

"I didn't notice any."

"Did you meet anyone?"

"Not a soul. Why?"

"Finally, have you any idea of the time of death?"

"I wasn't paying much attention. . . . Between four and five, I'm sure."

"Thank you."

The smell of the soup had roused the Inspector's appetite. He betook himself to a restaurant noted for its Normandy sole and its tripe *à la mode de Caen*. Even the restaurant, like all the other scenes which Maigret had visited that day, had something dusty and solemn about it — a sort of deliberate austerity.

Yet this was the sort of case that Maigret liked best: a dignified façade, venerable and decorous characters, every indication of virtue exaggerated to the point of boredom. And then it was up to Maigret to tear down that façade, to sniff around in the ruins and nose out at last the human beast, the most unforgivable of evils, the killer for profit.

He was taking it easy on this case. There was a certain malicious pleasure in proceeding slowly, in playing cat and mouse with the murderer. . . .

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The prosecutor had repeated, "Do what you must, but be discreet! A slip could cost you dear . . . and me, too. Philippe Deligeard is a well-known man about town; he may have his debts, but he's received everywhere. And as for the girl — Cécile, as you call her — if you lay a hand on her, you'll have the press championing her as the victim of the capitalists. The watchword, Inspector, is discretion!"

And Maigret had murmured to himself, disrespectfully, "All right, old lady! But nobody's going to get away with anything."

The tripe was tasty, and Maigret left the table in a state of bliss heightened by his inability to refuse the proprietor's calvados.

"Pretty soon I'll have it all straightened out," he promised himself. "And now, an interview with that butler. . . ."

The Deligeards' butler answered his ring and began to show him into the waiting-room.

"No, my friend, it's you I want to talk to. You know who I am, don't you? What were you doing when I rang?"

"Coffee was being served in the kitchen."

"Then I'll have my coffee in there with you."

There was nothing for the butler to do in the face of this self-invitation but to lead Maigret to the kitchen and announce to the cook and the chauffeur, "The Inspector would like a cup of coffee. . . ."

Arsène, the chauffeur, wore a very elegant gray uniform, now unbuttoned for kitchen informality. The cook was a very fat woman.

"Don't disturb yourselves on my account, friends. I could have called you down to headquarters; but it wasn't worth bothering you for such trifles. Don't button up, Arsène! Be comfortable. . . . By the way, how did you happen to have the day off the day before yesterday? Was it your regular day?"

"Not exactly. That morning the boss said out of a clear sky that I couldn't have my day off next week on account of a trip to the South, so I'd better take it then."

"Monsieur Philippe drove himself, then?"

"Yes. I didn't think he'd be needing the car, but I noticed he'd used it."

"How could you tell?"

"There were mud spots inside."

"It wasn't raining; so he must have gone to the country?"

"Well, around here, you see, the country starts right near the house. A few hundreds yards and you're off the paved roads."

Maigret turned to the butler. "And where were you during the afternoon?"

"In the pantry, which is near the entrance hall. The day before yesterday I was polishing the silver."

"Can you tell me what time Madame Croizier went out?"

"A few minutes before four, the same as every day. Her appointment with the dentist was at four, and he's

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only a stone's throw away from here."

"She looked well?"

"She always did. She was a very well preserved woman — very cheerful, not at all proud. She never went by without a word for us."

"Did she say anything in particular to you this time?"

"No. She simply called out, 'See you later, Victor.' "

"She walked to the dentist's office?"

"Madame Croizier did not care for automobiles. Even when she went home to Bayeux, she always preferred to take the train."

"Could you tell me where the car was at that time?"

"No, monsieur."

"It wasn't in the garage?"

"No, monsieur. Monsieur and Madame went out in it immediately after lunch. They came back about an hour later, but they must have left the car outside. I should tell you it's never parked in this street — it's too narrow — but around the corner, where I can't see it when I open the door."

"So Monsieur and Madame, as you say, came back around three. One hour later, a little before four, Madame Joséphine Croizier went out. Then?"

"Mademoiselle Cécile called."

"At what time?"

"Four ten. I told her that her aunt had left, and she went away."

"She didn't see anyone except you?"

"No one."

"And then?"

"Monsieur went out. It was four twenty-five. I noticed the time, because it was a little early for him."

"He wasn't carrying anything?"

"Not a thing."

"He was behaving normally?"

"I think so."

"Go on."

"I'd just begun on the knives. . . . Yes . . . that was all that happened then. And it was almost five when Madame Croizier came back."

"Still looking fine?"

"And in very good humor. She said to me as she went by that it's all wrong to talk about dentists as people who hurt you. . . ."

"She went up to her room?"

"Yes."

"Hers is the Louis XIV room?"

"Indeed it is."

"The yellow room, on the right?"

"Oh, no! That's the Regency room. That's hardly ever used."

"What happened next?"

"I don't know. . . . Several minutes went by. Then Madame came down, all excited —"

"Just a moment. How many minutes went by?"

"About twenty. . . . At any rate, it was well after five when Madame asked me to call Monsieur at his club and tell him his aunt had had an attack."

"So you phoned him and told him?"

"Yes."

"That's all you said?"

"It's all I knew."

"Then you went upstairs?"

"No; none of us went upstairs. A

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young doctor came and Madame took him up. . . . It wasn't until seven that we were officially informed of Madame Croizier's death, and not till eight that we all saw her —"

"In the yellow room?"

"No! In the blue room."

A bell rang. Victor groaned, "It's Monsieur. He wants his tea."

And Maigret turned slowly toward the door.

When he was through at the house in the Rue des Récollets, Maigret found his way to the offices of Caen's leading daily newspaper, where he purchased a copy of yesterday's paper.

Over a glass of beer in a sidewalk café he studied the paper carefully, with particular attention to the obituary column in which Mademoiselle Cécile had learned the news of her aunt's death.

Over a second beer he meditated. Suddenly he said aloud, "Discretion!" Then he rose, paid his bill, flagged a taxi, and rode to the outskirts of town, where the paved streets end.

"The Prosecutor asks you to wait."

Maigret waited. The bench was hard and the hallway was dusty in the Caen courthouse.

It was ten in the morning. A policeman had showed up early at his *pension* (a poor substitute for Madame Maigret and the flat in Paris) with a terse summons from the prosecutor requesting Maigret's presence at the office at ten sharp.

At ten minutes after ten he rose from his bench and approached the attendant. "Is there someone in the Prosecutor's office?"

"I should think so. He's been in there since nine thirty. It's Monsieur Deligeard."

An odd smile drifted across Maigret's lips. Each time he passed before a certain padded door, he heard a murmur of voices. And each time the same smile crossed his lips again.

It was after ten thirty when a bell summoned the attendant, who returned to announce, "The Prosecutor will see you now."

And Philippe Deligeard had not yet left. Maigret thrust his hot pipe in his pocket and went in with a slow ponderousness which was at least half assumed. If often struck Maigret's fancy, especially when he was in a particularly good humor, to assume a deliberate air of stupidity — at which times he seemed clumsy, bumbling and even fatter than usual.

"My respects to the Prosecutor. A very good day to you, Monsieur Deligeard."

"Close the door, Inspector. You place me in an extremely delicate and disagreeable situation. What did I recommend to you yesterday?"

"Discretion, Monsieur Prosecutor."

"Did I not also tell you that I placed no reliance on the fables of that girl, that Cécile?"

"And you told me that Monsieur Deligeard was an important man in Caen and we had to be very careful how we handled things where he was involved." Maigret smiled blandly,

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looking out of the corner of his eye at Philippe.

In full mourning, Monsieur Deligeard seemed even more solemn than the Prosecutor. He affected an air of complete disinterest, not even turning toward the Inspector.

The Prosecutor glared ferociously at the Inspector, as if he suspected the irony that lay behind this oafish affability. He seemed to have some trouble controlling his anger as he ordered, "Sit down! I detest people who pace about!"

"Gladly, Monsieur Prosecutor."

"Where were you at nine o'clock last night?"

"At nine? Let me think. . . . Why, I must have been at Monsieur Deligeard's."

"Without his knowledge! Behind his back! You were there under false pretenses; no search warrant had been issued to you!"

"I had a few questions to ask his servants."

"That is exactly why Monsieur Deligeard has come here to bring charges against you. Those charges, I am forced to admit, are completely justified. You have overstepped your rights. If you needed to question the servants, you should have notified their employer of the fact; that is elementary. You understand me?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Prosecutor." And Maigret maliciously lowered his eyes like a petty civil servant caught in an error.

"That is not all! What follows is far more serious — so serious that I cannot yet foresee all the repercussions which your actions will provoke in high places. After you had complaisantly listened to, solicited, and I may even say provoked malicious gossip from the servants, you left the house; but it was not long before you re-entered by another door. I suppose you do not deny this?"

Maigret sighed humbly.

"What key did you use to open the garden door? Was it perchance Cécile Ledru who lent it to you? I advise you to weigh carefully the consequences of your answer."

"I didn't have a key to the little door. I really wasn't even planning to go into the garden. I just wanted to know how they brought in the body. . . ."

"What's that?" Both the Prosecutor and Philippe rose abruptly, one as pale as the other.

"I'll tell you all about that in a minute, if you want me to. But about the door: I saw that it had a childishly simple lock. Any honest pass-key ought to be able to open it. I wanted to make sure, so I tried it. It was a dark night. The garden was deserted. I noticed that it wasn't far to the garage. Now, I didn't want to disturb Monsieur Deligeard for such a trifle, especially in his sorrow; so I just went over to look at the mud spots Arsène was talking about."

The Prosecutor frowned. Philippe, his gloves in his hand, started to speak, but Maigret left him no opportunity.

"That's all. . . . I know I shouldn't have done it. I ask your pardon and

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I'll try to justify myself as best I can."

"You confess to a violation of the code! You, a police inspector —"

"I can't say how sorry I am, Monsieur Prosecutor. . . . If I hadn't been so careful not to disturb Monsieur Deligeard — I knew he'd just had his tea sent up — I might have asked him some questions —"

"That will do! I may add that I do not care for this tone of mockery which you seem to feel you have the right to assume. I am forwarding today, to the Ministry of Police, Monsieur Deligeard's charges against you. I believe we may now, until further notice, consider this incident closed. I trust that I have given you every possible satisfaction."

"Thank you, my dear Prosecutor. This man's conduct has been an outrage. I assure you that it is only my regard for the reputation of the police that restrains me from taking even stronger measures."

The Prosecutor received Monsieur Deligeard's hand with cordial warmth and hastened to show him to the door.

"Again thank you. I'll be seeing you soon, I trust?"

"I'll be at the funeral tomorrow, Monsieur Deligeard, and I hope —"

Suddenly they heard Maigret's voice peacefully observing, "Monsieur Prosecutor for the Republic, I should like, if you'd allow, to ask this man one question. Just one."

The Prosecutor frowned. Deligeard, already on the threshold, paused automatically, and Maigret murmured, "Could you tell me, monsieur, if you will go to Caroline's funeral?"

The Prosecutor was astonished at the effect of these words. In one instant Philippe's face seemed to fall apart.

Still placid, too placid, Maigret closed the door.

"You can see that we aren't really through yet. I beg your pardon for detaining you, but I'm only afraid it won't be for long enough."

"Inspector —" the Prosecutor began.

"Don't be afraid. This Caroline doesn't mean that I'm planning, as the papers say, to unveil the secrets of private life. She isn't a kept woman or a working girl seduced by Monsieur Deligeard. It's all perfectly respectable; she's his old nurse. . . ."

"I must ask you to explain . . ."

"As lucidly as I can without wasting your time and without showing you where it all happened. . . . I'll begin, if you wish, with The Mystery of the Yellow Room, which must surely bring back pleasant memories of your boyhood reading. And this yellow room was the basis of all my my discoveries; or rather, it confirmed my suspicions and allowed me to proceed. — Stop looking at the door, Monsieur Deligeard! It's no use."

"I am waiting," the Prosecutor sighed, playing with a letter opener.

"You must know that on the second floor of the house in the Rue des Récollets, Madame Joséphine Croizier occupied the bedroom on the left, called the Louis XIV room, which

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had pale blue hangings. Now, at a few minutes to five, Joséphine Croizier entered the house in the best of health, exchanged a pleasantry or two with the butler, and went up to her room. Which is to say, the blue room.

"Now when Doctor Liévin answered the telephone summons at five ten, he was shown into the bedroom on the right, the Regency room, which is furnished in a lovely yellow. And in this room the poor old lady lay, already undressed and in her night clothes, without even a trace of the disorder which follows a hasty undressing. What is your opinion?"

"Go on!" the lawyer said dryly.

"Nor was this the only mystery involved. Here's another: Young Doctor Liévin, who has only just come to the district and who treats poor people for a ten-franc consultation fee, is summoned to the elegant mansion of the Deligeards in preference to any other practitioner. He finds that the death took place at around four fifteen. Who's lying? The doctor, or the butler who saw Madame Croizier come in a little before five? And if it's the butler, the dentist must be lying too; he states that at four fifteen the old lady of Bayeux was in his office."

"I don't understand. . . ."

"Patience! I didn't understand it either, at first. Any more than I understood why Monsieur Deligeard, who left his house earlier than usual that day, did not reach his club until five fifteen."

"Sometimes a man walks faster or slower. . . ." This defense came from the Prosecutor; Deligeard, his face drained of color, sat motionless.

"Then answer this question, Monsieur Prosecutor. Monsieur Philippe had hardly reached the club when his butler phoned him that his aunt had had an attack. That was all the butler said, because it was as much as he knew. Then Monsieur Deligeard went back to the card-room, shocked, and announced that his aunt had just died."

The Prosecutor cast an unpleasant look at Philippe, who sat motionless.

"Now for the secondary questions: Why, on that particular day, had Monsieur Deligeard given his chauffeur the day off on the pretext of a coming trip? Coincidence? All right. Why does he take the car out at two in the afternoon, and then leave it outside? Where do he and his wife go between two and three?"

"To the bedside of a sick woman!" Philippe suddenly answered.

"To the bedside — exactly — of Caroline, of Caroline who lives on the outskirts of town, which accounts for the mud. And I can prove that that mud comes from in front of the lime-kiln, across from Caroline's house."

As if mechanically, Maigret had begun to load his pipe and pace up and down the office.

"We are confronted, my dear Prosecutor, with one of the basest, meanest crimes I have ever encountered — at the same time almost a perfect crime — a crime predicated on the assumption that there cannot possibly be more than a token investigation

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into a superficially plausible death of a leading citizen of a provincial town.

"Philippe Deligeard has never done a blessed thing in his life but marry a rich wife, live on a grand scale, and speculate with so little judgment that he lost her entire fortune. For three years he's been in desperate straits; and his only resource is his aunt, who refuses to help him.

"It's obvious. It's simple!"

"Monsieur Deligeard will not contradict me when I say that there were days, despite the grand life he led, when there wasn't a hundred francs of cash money in the house.

"You can't learn a profession or a trade at his age. You can't change your way of living overnight.

"The aunt is old. In spite of that disquieting girl Cécile Ledru, she won't disinherit her nephew — especially since my fine Cécile doesn't approve of it. But just to make sure, Philippe drops a hint to the old lady that the girl is somewhat less pure than the driven snow. . . .

"You're following me, Monsieur Prosecutor? You might say that the murder is already decided upon, out of sheer necessity: Joséphine Croizier has to die if the Deligeards are to go on living according to their tastes.

"On the other hand, if it's easy enough to push someone over the borderline between life and death, it's a tough job to hide the cause of death from the doctors. Particularly in a case of inheritance, and above all in the provinces, poison is risky; it's the first thing the gossips will think of, and everybody knows that the Deligeards are penniless. Shooting's impossible . . . a knife leaves traces. . . .

"As I say, the murder is already decided upon. All that's lacking is opportunity — the opportunity to do away with the old lady with no risks.

"And then, all of a sudden, there's the opportunity.

"Philippe has an old nurse, Caroline, just about Madame Croizier's age, who lives alone in a house just outside of town and who has no relatives. She's had several heart attacks. Now the Deligeards get word that she's had another. They go to see her at two in the afternoon, and come back an hour later knowing that Caroline hasn't two hours to live.

"The arrangement of the house favors their plans, but still they're careful to overlook no detail.

"Madame Deligeard leaves at once by the back door, walks to Caroline's — it isn't far — and holds her bedside vigil until the old nurse dies around four fifteen.

"Philippe does not leave the house until his usual hour — a little earlier because of his impatience. He finds his car around the corner, drives to Caroline's, loads the body in the car, and brings his wife back with him.

"The two of them, still using the back door, bring the body into the house and set it up in the yellow room on the second floor.

"As far as the servants know, Madame Deligeard has not left the house; her husband is on his way to the club.

"They are in the house, waiting for

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the aunt to return. She must come soon. . . . She does, she enters her bedroom — the blue room — and is killed on the spot.

"All that is left is for Philippe to go to his club — by the back door, in his car — to create an alibi. He is to drive back in the car later, explaining his prompt return probably by saying that he took a taxi.

"The doctor is carefully chosen because he knows neither the house nor Joséphine Croizier. Madame shows him Caroline's body; he quite correctly diagnoses natural death and signs the certificate. The same business later with the medical examiner.

"Take the nurse's body back to her house late that night, and the job's done."

There was a silence. The Prosecutor studied his letter opener as he asked, "What made you think of Caroline?"

"Logic! The two doctors could not possibly have examined the body of Joséphine Croizier. So I bought the next day's paper. I read the list of deaths. I was certain I'd find at least one old lady. I found her, I investigated, and when I learned her connection with the Deligeards, the case was as good as over. Her neighbors will testify to various comings and goings by car that day; they didn't think anything about it because they knew the old lady's former employers often came to see her. Possibly the one thing in his life that's to Philippe Deligeard's credit."

The silence was heavy. Then, with a sudden rap of the letter opener, the Prosecutor asked hesitantly, "Do you confess, Philippe Deligeard?"

"I will answer only in the presence of my attorney."

The traditional formula. . . . His face was bloodless. He faltered and stumbled as he tried to get up. Maigret had to bring him a glass of water.

The autopsy on Joséphine Croizier revealed that her heart was in excellent condition, and that she had been clumsily killed, first by attempted strangulaton with a corset lace, then, doubtless because she was still struggling, by two knife wounds.

"I am compelled to congratulate you, Inspector," the Prosecutor admitted with a glacial smile. "You are indeed the star performer that you are said to be. Nevertheless, I must confess to you that your methods, in a small city, are perilous."

"Which means I won't last long at Caen?"

"It is indeed true that —"

"Thanks."

"But —"

"I haven't been too happy here myself. My wife's waiting for me in Paris. All I hope is that your Caen jury won't be so impressed by the luxurious mansion of that blackguard Philippe that they'll forget to ask for the death penalty."

Deliberately Maigret struck a match, held it to his pipe, breathed in deeply, and launched a vast cloud of smoke into the sacrosanct office of the Prosecutor of Caen.

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Is there an American reader of popular fiction who does not know the name of Octavus Roy Cohen? We doubt it. Mr. Cohen is one of the most versatile and prolific writers of magazine stories in the history of publishing. Why, we recall one critic saying that "an issue of 'The Saturday Evening Post' without a Cohen serial or short story was hardly thinkable." Perhaps the critic was exaggerating, or even jesting, but surely there was a period in which Octavus Roy Cohen was one of the SEP's constant contributors.

And yet, despite his enormous success as a humorist and popular writer, Mr. Cohen may be remembered most vividly for his detective stories. Who will ever forget "the fat, commonplace, unlovely and semi-illiterate" Jim Hanvey? We commend to your attention JIM HANVEY, DETECTIVE *and* SCRAMBLED YEGGS. *Then there are the criminous adventures of Epic Peters, the philosophical Pullman porter. And the occasional sorties into the realm of the private-eye by that "thinkin'est" man, the ebullient, ebon-hued Florian Slappey . . . a Gumshoe Gallery that will not die, or even fade away . . .*

For EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest, Octavus Roy Cohen submitted a most unusual tale — a blend of straight cop story and ingenious riddle. The cop part of it is one of Mr. Cohen's long suits: he has an astonishing knowledge of police procedure — indeed, the majority of his closest friends in Los Angeles, where Mr. Cohen now lives, are working policemen; and the same was very nearly true when he lived in New York City. It is the riddle part of the story which comes as a surprise: for here is a cop story which challenges you to deduce the workings of a detective's mind. Even though you are forewarned, can you see through the detective's plan, can you spot the clever trick played on the man wanted by the FBI?

ALWAYS TRUST A COP

by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

THE VOICE AT THE OTHER END OF the telephone said, "I'm talking from the Los Angeles airport," but to Johnny Norton it didn't seem that way. The voice was coming to him across six thousand miles of ocean, from a steaming island in the South Pacific. He'd last heard that voice a half-dozen years ago, at night, in a foxhole. It had said:

"What's eatin' on you, Johnny? How come you ain't sayin' nothin'?"

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The voice on the telephone said, "What's eatin' on you? How come you ain't sayin' nothin'?"

Johnny pulled himself together. He said, "Tex Graham!" and the voice answered, "Of course it's Tex! Who else would it be?"

"Well, listen, fella. After all this time . . ."

"Didn't I promise you'd see me after we got off that stinkin' island? How are you, you old so-and-so?" Except that Tex didn't say so-and-so. He used good, old-fashioned, affectionate Marine talk.

"I'm fine, Tex. You?"

"Right side up is all. How's tricks? You married or something?"

"Yeh. Been married six months. Living in Hollywood."

"I know. Found your name in the 'phone book. Solid citizen, huh? Whatcha doin' for a livin'?"

"I got a pretty good job."

"Well knock off. I'm shovin' off at 2 A.M. You got a car?"

"A sort of one."

"Hop in it. Bring the old lady. We'll have dinner together and shoot the breeze. How long it take you to make it here?"

"Forty minutes maybe."

"I'll be waitin' in the American Airlines Building. Jeez! kid, it'll be good to see you. Specially without them Japs gettin' in our hair."

Johnny Norton hung up the telephone. He was a big blond kid, 28 years old, weighing around 180. He stood with his back against the wall, staring at his wife, Mary, who was also blonde and whose eyes were the same color blue as his. Johnny said, "That was Tex Graham."

"No!"

"Yeh. He's at the airport. Invited us for dinner: you and me both."

She moved close to him and put one hand on his arm. "Gee! I'm sorry, Johnny," and he said, "I got to do it, honey. I'm a cop."

Yes, he was a cop. She thought he was the handsomest cop in Los Angeles. Funny, the thrill she got out of his blue uniform with the big gold-and-silver badge, the black Sam Browne belt, and the precisely creased blue shirt. She looked him over now and said, "Where's your gun?"

"Left it with Eddie Morgan. He's putting on a new pair of grips for me. He'll have it fixed by roll call tomorrow morning." Then he caught a question in her eyes, and said, "It's not that kind of a deal, honey. Tex doesn't know I'm a cop. I'll put on civilian clothes."

"It's not going to be easy, is it, Johnny?"

"You can say that again."

"You have to go?"

"Sure. It's been set up a long time. It's my job to finger him for the FBI."

"Why?" she asked, "If they have his picture?"

"Because the boys in the local office don't know him. He may have changed since the picture was taken: deliberately or otherwise. But he couldn't be so much changed that I wouldn't recognize him."

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She was sorry for Johnny. This was a tough assignment. He'd never told her much about the war, but everything he'd told her — every experience — had featured Tex Graham. She watched him dial a number.

"FBI? . . . Connor there? . . . Hilton? . . . Can you reach either of 'em? . . . Sure, it's important . . . This is Officer Norton, Hollywood Division . . . Somebody they want is in town . . . No, I'll be gone . . . Tell them to call the Lieutenant. I'll tell him the score."

He called the Station, got the Lieutenant:

"Johnny Norton talking, Lieutenant. Remember that Tex Graham deal the FBI was talking to us about?"

"The guy you was in the Marines with? The one they want for murder and robbery in Oklahoma?"

"Yeh. Well, he's here. Just till 2 A.M. Connor and Hilton, the two FBI special agents: I just called them. They're out. They want this pinch in a big way. I left word for them to give you a buzz as soon as they showed up."

"What's the scoop, Johnny?"

"I'm meeting Tex right away at the International airport. American Airlines Building. He invited Mary and me for dinner, so if we ain't in that shack, maybe we'll be eating on the Flight Deck. If anything slips, I'll phone you."

"Want us to send out a couple of detectives?"

"Handle it your own way, Lieutenant. But it's FBI's baby. I'll be in civvies."

"Keep your guard up."

"Hell! Lieutenant, I'm not in on this. Like I said, it's all FBI. All they wanted was for me to let them know if he ever got in touch with me, then to help identify him. What they do when they pick him up is their business. I'm not sticking my chin out."

The Lieutenant said okay, and Johnny hung up. He took off his uniform and arranged it meticulously on a hanger in the closet of the tiny apartment. He put on a sports shirt, a pair of slacks, and a Hollywood coat. He changed from black shoes to brown. He looked at Mary, tried to smile, and gave it up as a bad job.

She understood. She always understood how Johnny felt about things. She said, "That's why I'm going with you."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

She came close to him and took his hands in hers. "The reason I'm going," she said, "is because when it's all over you're going to be feeling pretty low."

He was grateful and said so. It wasn't as though there would be danger. It was an FBI show exclusively. She said, "Don't let it get you down, Johnny. What you've got to do isn't easy, but it's your job."

"I know. But I still wish the guy had gone somewhere else. The FBI set up deals like this every place in the country where Tex had a pal. What hurts is . . . well, dammit! I love the guy."

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"He's a murderer, isn't he?"

"Yeh. Sure. But that ain't how I remember him . . ."

No, it wasn't. He remembered boot camp, and rigorous training in Panama. Then the islands. Good times and bad times. He remembered Tex Graham as the toughest Marine in a tough outfit. He'd been flattered to be Tex's closest friend.

Tex had been a killer, even in the Marines. But you judged things by different standards then. It was your job to kill, provided you yourself wanted to live. In one or two places, it had been a little war. Even on Tarawa it had seemed little because he and Tex had usually been on patrol, isolated from the main show. A guy was on his own then. Just him and his buddy and the few others that made up the patrol. You did what you had to do, and tried not to think about it afterward.

It hadn't taken Tex long to learn his way around. He said he'd always had it tough, he didn't mind a little thing like a war. The jungle — well, he didn't like that so much, but he got used to it. Pretty soon he was teaching Johnny and the other men in the platoon. They made him corporal, and would have busted him except that he was too valuable on patrol. What he went after, he got.

He and Johnny were always close. They did a lot of talking, when they had time. It was funny about that: Johnny knew which side was up, but Tex's slant on things — once in a while that got him. He tried to shrug it off, to sell himself the idea that Tex was kidding. But he knew it was on the level, really. He had reason to know . . .

Driving out to the airport, Johnny briefed his young wife on the situation. He said they'd taken Tex off Tarawa on a stretcher, and that was the last he'd seen of the guy. Hadn't even heard from him until just now. But *about* him: that was different.

Johnny didn't know for sure whether Tex had always had a bad streak . . . you couldn't tell when there was a war on. But he certainly had gone bad since VJ day. Half a dozen deals, winding up with bank robbery and murder in Oklahoma. That was when FBI got into the case. They'd checked Tex up one side and down the other. They had made contact with everybody they heard about who'd ever been buddies with the guy: Johnny included. Some day, somewhere, they figured Tex might get in touch with one of 'em. They had read the cards right, obviously, because that's what Tex had done.

"Just one thing I'm worried about, Johnny," she said. "Are you sure he doesn't know you're a policeman?"

"Yeh. If he'd known, he'd never have called me."

The set-up seemed fantastic to her. That her Johnny and this Tex Graham had been close friends seemed incredible: one innately decent, the other plumb bad; one proud to be a cop, hating crime and criminals, the other snatching whatever he wanted at the point of a gun.

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Well, what Johnny had to do was simple enough: Just meet Tex and keep him occupied until FBI showed up. Then point him out. It was a job Johnny hated, but there was nothing he could do about it. When you're a cop you don't debate letting a murderer get away, even if he is your friend. Sure, you hate to snag him, or even to help; you wish it was somebody else doing it. But when there isn't anyone else, you just go ahead and obey orders.

It was after dark when they reached the airport. Johnny voiced one last word of warning. He said, "Play it smooth, honey. Tex is sharp. Don't give him any hint you're expecting something to happen."

"Will there be trouble, Johnny?"

"Not a chance. Tex won't know these guys. They'll close in on him from both sides before he knows what's happening." He took one hand from the steering wheel and closed it reassuringly over hers. "I wouldn't let you be leading with your chin: you know that."

She said, Yes, she knew — but that didn't keep her from being worried. Not the physical danger: she accepted his word that there wasn't any, but she knew he was having a bad time, that he'd give plenty not to be mixed up in it.

There were a lot of lights at the airport. They found a parking place, and started walking. They passed TWA and United and Western and Pan-American and walked into American Airlines. It was a rather small building, with counters and clerks and porters and a newsstand, and speakers that murmured at you from the wall announcing plane departures and arrivals, summoning passengers who hadn't checked their tickets or had their luggage weighed.

They walked inside. A man got up from a leather-cushioned chair and bore down on them. He was about 30 years old, and approximately Johnny's size and build. He had black eyes and hair, and he looked as though he'd be able to handle himself anywhere.

He grabbed Johnny and started pumping his hand. He called him a lot of names and said profane things, affectionately. Then he turned around and looked at Mary, and Johnny said, "This is the old lady, Tex."

Tex stuck out a big, hard hand. He said he was pleased to meet her, and how did she ever come to pick a no-good so-and-so like Johnny Norton. He had a soft Texas drawl, and he was so unsuspecting and so delighted at meeting his wartime buddy again that Mary felt sorry for him.

Tex started telling her things about Johnny. He was a great ribber. He told about dames, and put it on so thick she knew he was kidding. Meanwhile, she saw Johnny glancing at the door, watching for the FBI agents who were to make the pinch.

"How's about some chow?" inquired Johnny. "You hungry?"

"When'd you ever see me when I wasn't?"

"They got a good restaurant right here."

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"Hell," said Tex. "I been livin' in restaurants, 'specially airport ones. What about letting the Missus fix me up some home cooking: I ain't pulling out until two in the morning."

That was what Tex said, but Johnny knew that what he meant was something far deeper than that.

Tex had been on the lam for a long time. He was wanted. He never knew where or when they might close in on him, and the prospect of spending several hours in a public place was bound to make him nervous. Of course, Johnny preferred to remain right where he was, and so he tried to stall. He said, "Well gee! Tex — Mary hadn't figured on doing any cooking tonight."

Tex grinned at her. "Not even for an old friend of your husband's?" and Mary said, sure, she'd be glad to fix a dinner for him. Tex was enthusiastic. Like a kid. He said it'd be swell to relax in Johnny's home, to eat Johnny's wife's cooking, to spend a few hours chewing the fat.

Mary saw that her husband didn't like the way things were going. She knew he was mentally bawling out the Lieutenant for not having kept hard after the FBI, that he was sore at the FBI for not being at the airport. She was afraid Johnny would give himself away, and so she took the reins in her own hands. She said they'd drive back together and that she'd stop at a market and buy some beer and stuff. Johnny caught what she had in mind, and he went along with it.

Driving in, she marveled at their man-talk. Funny how the tiniest detail of their service days together seemed important. They laughed about things that didn't seem very funny to her, and she was shrewd enough to realize that what they were laughing about were the parts they both knew but weren't saying.

They approached a market that was still open and she told Johnny to stop there. She said, pointedly, "You and Tex stay in the car. I'll only be a few minutes."

She made sure they weren't following her before going to a telephone booth at the rear of the market. She called the Hollywood Station and got the Lieutenant. She identified herself, and asked what had gone wrong.

The Lieutenant said, "That's what I'm asking you, Mrs. Norton. I just got a call from those FBI boys at the airport wanting to know where you are."

She told him where they were, and explained that they'd had to play things Tex Graham's way to keep him from suspecting that anything was wrong. Besides, Johnny wasn't armed, and undoubtedly Tex was. She said they were headed home, and that she was going to cook dinner, and then they'd spend the evening until it was time for Tex to go back to the airport.

"I'll get right in touch with them Special Agents," promised the Lieutenant. "They'll probably stake your apartment house, after you get home."

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"You know which apartment it is?"

"No. We just got the address."

"It's the first floor, north side of the building. We're the rear apartment. There's a front one, and two just like them on the south side. Same arrangement on the second floor." She lowered her voice. "Will there be trouble?"

"Not where you'll be, there won't. We'll probably send a few of our dicks to assist FBI. They'll stake the building on all four sides. Don't you worry: they won't come busting in. They wouldn't take that chance — shooting it out in a small apartment where there's a woman and a policeman."

"How will they get him?"

"When he goes out. And look, Mrs. Norton — there'll be a man in back of the building. How about making an excuse to step outside: you know, empty the garbage or something? You can give him the set-up."

She said, "I've got a disposal unit. If I can think of any other excuse I'll . . ."

"Right. But play it cagey. This Graham is bad medicine."

She hung up, bought some beer, a loaf of bread, and a few other things she didn't need, so as to have enough packages to make her long absence look plausible. As she got in the car, taking the window seat, she caught an inquiring glance from her husband, and gave him an almost imperceptible nod in answer. They backed out of the parking space and started for home.

She'd almost told the Lieutenant she was scared. Thinking it over now, she realized that she was more worried than frightened: worried chiefly because she knew something had to happen, but she didn't know when or where or how. She kept reminding herself that this man whose big body was wedged against hers was a killer, and, what was more, the minute he was caught, his own life was forfeit. She was afraid of the unknown, afraid that her husband might make some betraying move. And she had one fear which was greater than either of those: *she was afraid of the detectives who would be watching their apartment.*

Johnny Norton worked in uniform, and he hadn't been at the Hollywood Station long. He knew a lot of the men downstairs, but he'd told her often that he seldom got to meet detectives. They didn't have much contact with each other, the detectives and the uniformed men. The few times he'd had to go upstairs with suspects or reports, it had been to talk to the day commander, and Johnny had always been in uniform.

There was another angle, too. Johnny worked days. The few detectives he knew — and who knew him — also worked that watch. They changed watch at 5 P.M., and the men that came on after that were strangers to him and he to them.

No, the night-watch detectives wouldn't know him. The FBI men would, because they'd talked to him about this deal. But two Special

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Agents couldn't be on four sides of the building at the same time. And if trouble started, there was danger that one of the cops might not know which was Tex Graham and which was Johnny Norton.

They got home, left the car parked at the curb, and went inside. Johnny snapped on the light, and Tex said, "Nice apartment. We never had it so good in the Islands, did we, Johnny?" and Johnny said, No, they never had. He motioned Tex to their best easy chair, shoved some cigarettes at him and told him to make himself at home.

Mary took the men's hats and coats and hung them in the hall closet near the bedroom. She went into the kitchen and started fixing dinner. She could hear them talking. It was the same old theme: the war, the experiences they had shared. Tex lighted a fresh cigarette. "What a life that was," he said. "Nobody gave a hoot for nothin' except gettin' outa there. Didn't care whether school kept or not. When I got hit on Tarawa, it was like gettin' a vacation ticket."

"What'd they do with you?"

"Fixed me up fine after they got to me. I had a bad five hours, though, lyin' there expecting the Nips to pick me up. They didn't like Marines."

"I'll say they didn't."

"Anyway, our gang found me. They shot me full of something and I woke up in a field hospital. Next thing I knew, I was at Base. Then on board ship. Then at General in Australia. Was that a soft touch!" Tex grinned at Johnny. "You never got a scratch, did you?"

"Nah. But what was left of the boys sure missed you. The patrol never was the same."

Mary listened with half an ear. She went ahead with dinner: pork chops, baked beans, a can of asparagus, rolls, coffee, a simple salad. She took three apple turnovers out of the freezing compartment and let them sit a while, preparatory to heating them for dessert.

She wanted to go outside, to talk to whoever was stationed there. But she was afraid. Tex was keen. He might think it was funny, might follow to see what was happening. All she could manage was to get to the back window and peep through a corner of the shade over the sink. Half-concealed in the shadows, she saw a man with a shotgun. FBI or cop, she didn't know. But they were there. Front, back, and sides. No chance for Tex to get away. They'd snag him or shoot him. Either way, with the raps he had hanging over him, he was as good as dead. It didn't check with the laughter she heard coming from the other room.

What they were laughing about, she didn't know; but it must have been some intimate experience, because they'd been discussing it in whispers. There was that service side of Johnny's life, chunks of it she'd never know. It occurred to her that this could have been a wonderful evening for Johnny if his friend had been other than what he was.

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Dinner was okay. It was ten o'clock before she'd finished with the dishes and joined them in the living-room. There hadn't been a sound from outside.

She could see the strain in Johnny's eyes. She didn't know much, but she knew a lot more than Johnny did, and he must be worried plenty. Some of the time, it seemed as though he wasn't listening to what Tex was saying. Occasionally he looked at her, but she didn't dare to flash him any signal, even of reassurance. All she could do was to smile and give the impression that things were under control.

Time was working against them. The hands of the mantel clock were creeping forward, closer and closer to the moment when Tex would say he had to leave. That was what frightened her. It was the minutes beyond that when the play would pass into other hands. She had quit being sorry for Tex. All she could think of now was her worry about Johnny.

Sooner or later there would be fireworks. There had to be. And when they started, Johnny would be just fool enough to move in on Tex, unarmed. Duty. Johnny was too acutely aware of his responsibilities as a policeman. And she knew he'd do whatever he could to protect her when the trouble started . . .

Tex got up and stepped into the hall. She saw him open the closet door. He fumbled in his topcoat pocket and came back with a fresh pack of cigarettes.

Tex grinned at them and went to the north window. He pulled back the shade a fraction of an inch and looked out. He said, "Nice view you got," and walked back to his chair.

He sat down, opened his pack of cigarettes, and lighted one. Then he reached under his coat and took out an army .45. He looked straight at Johnny and said quietly, "You're a cop, aren't you, kid?"

Johnny pretended surprise and asked him what gave him such an idea.

"When I got my cigarettes just now. Your uniform is in that closet."

Johnny tried to grin. "Is it so bad to be a cop?" he asked.

"Yeh." Tex's voice was flat. "Especially when there's other cops outside. I saw two of them through that window. One has a shotgun. You knew, didn't you, Johnny?"

Johnny said, Yes, he knew, and the best thing Tex could do would be to give himself up. This was a hell of a note Johnny said, putting an old friend on the spot.

Tex said, "A guy plays 'em as he sees 'em, Johnny. It looks kinda lousy to me, but then I ain't at home on your side of the fence.

Johnny choked up. He asked why Tex had been such a fool as to get in touch with him. "They figured you would if you ever came through L. A. They had the deal all set up."

"How many men outside?"

"I don't know."

Mary said, "Too many for you to have a chance, Tex."

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He shook his head. "A guy's always got a chance as long as he's breathing. You know what they want me for?"

Johnny said, Yes, robbery and murder.

"So I'm cooked." Tex was silent for quite a while. "If they was figurin' to bust in, they'd have done it long ago. That means I'm safe as long as I stay here."

Johnny said that was the way it was.

"But I can't stick here forever. I gotta make a pitch."

"It won't get you anywhere, Tex."

"Being picked up wouldn't be healthy, either, Johnny. Remember that deal on one of them little islands, the first time we was on patrol together? Wasn't much chance there, it looked like. But we shot our way out, didn't we?"

"Some of us did."

"You know, that was the night I took a liking to you. Hell, we'd had fun training and in Panama and all that stuff, but that night you came through. I'll bet you're one hell of a swell cop."

There wasn't anything Johnny could say to that. After about a half-minute Tex looked Mary's way and asked a question. "You do any telephoning when you was in that market?"

She nodded.

"What'd they tell you?"

"Just that they would stake the apartment."

He said, "Where's your gun, Johnny?"

Johnny explained he didn't have it: he'd left it with a guy to have a new pair of grips put on.

"You're as crazy as I am — tying up with me without a gun."

Johnny explained he hadn't known about that when he left the Station. It wasn't until he got home that the telephone call came in.

"How did you figure to take me?"

"I didn't. Two FBI agents were supposed to be at the airport. I stalled as long as I could, waiting for them to show up. When they didn't . . . hell, Tex, you ain't any dummy. I had to follow your lead or you'd have figured something was wrong."

"I would at that." He did some more thinking. "You got to get me out of here, Johnny."

"That ain't possible."

"It's got to be. I don't know the layout here. You do. There's got to be some sort of an exit they ain't got covered."

"Not a chance, Tex. You know those guys outside wouldn't overlook something like that."

"Keep thinkin', kid. It'd be a lot healthier if you come up with an idea. What I mean is, I ain't gonna take this sittin' down."

"What can you do?"

Tex looked embarrassed. "I hate to get your wife mixed up in this, Johnny, but there's no other way."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"Well, they haven't come in yet because of her. So they wouldn't take any chances of shootin' her no matter what happened. Pretty soon I'm going out. I'm taking her with me. First move anybody makes, I'll shoot her. I ain't kiddin', Johnny."

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No, he wasn't kidding. He'd do just that, because it was the only thing he could do. Tex said to Mary, "Look at it from my angle . . ."

She said she was, but did he think he could bring himself to shoot a woman?

"Sure. Why not? If it's my only chance? You got to believe me, Mary."

Johnny told her he believed Tex. He went on, "But, look — what would that give you? A little breather maybe. Sooner or later they'd snag you."

"Later. That's better than now. And look, kid: don't you start something on account you're scared about her. I'd hate to let you have it, but that's the way it would be."

"I know. Only thing is, Tex, I still don't think it would work. Honest, I don't. There's only one thing I can think of."

"What?"

"Let me talk to one of the boys outside. Or send word through the Station. They'd call it off."

"But they'd still tail me, wouldn't they?"

"Yeh, I guess so."

Mary looked from one to the other. Couple of old friends talking quietly, dispassionately. It was difficult to convince herself that her life was in danger; that, in the long run, Tex didn't have a chance; that Johnny was in the middle. It didn't seem any more real than when they'd been kidding about things that had happened on the other side of the world.

She said, with surprising calm: "We're stymied all around, aren't we, Tex? The men outside won't do anything so long as we're together in here. They can stake the place indefinitely. We can't just sit here that long."

"We won't. Like I said, you and I will walk out together. We'll walk real close, and I'll have my gun on you. They won't shoot. They won't even close in on us."

Johnny said, "I've thought of a dozen schemes, Tex — all tricks. But you'd know they were tricks."

Tex nodded. "You got me pegged, all right. You know, it's funny — you getting me into this thing, and me not being sore."

Johnny said he was thinking of Mary, nobody else.

"That's what I figure. You'd take a chance with yourself, but not with her. She's a swell gal, Johnny. Ain't many guys got it so lucky."

The clock was still moving. Time was closing in on them. Tex leaned back in his chair without relaxing his vigilance. Looked like he didn't want to talk, so they both kept quiet, too. Their eyes met and Mary smiled ever so slightly. It wasn't that she felt like smiling, but she wanted Johnny to know that she wasn't afraid.

But she was afraid. Terribly afraid. She'd been afraid all evening, ever since they left the airport, ever since she'd glanced through the window and seen the detective with the shotgun. She'd known then that the chips were down.

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Five minutes passed. Tex said softly, "You'll level with me, won't you, Johnny?"

"Sure. On account of Mary."

"Those guys outside are detectives, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"You're uniform. How many detectives do you know?"

"Mighty few."

"How many know you?"

"Even less than that. And none of the boys on the night watch."

"We're going to walk around the apartment, Johnny. You're gonna peek out, real careful. Tell me whether you know the men on this side and in back."

Johnny got up. So did Mary. Tex kept close to them, his gun handy. Johnny did what he was told, and then they were back in the living-room. Johnny said, "I don't know any of the three guys I could see."

"Better be sure, Johnny. If what I got in mind goes wrong, Mary's the one who takes it."

"That's straight, Tex. Of course, I don't know who's in front or on the other side. If the FBI men are there, I know 'em, and they know me."

Tex did a lot more thinking. He said, softly, "It could work, Johnny. It sure could."

Johnny waited.

"Remember in the Marines we used to wear each other's clothes once in a while?"

"What about it?"

"What's to say we couldn't do it again?"

Johnny said he didn't see what Tex was driving at.

"This. Suppose I put on your uniform. I take Mary and we slip out the back door. I make believe I'm you, and Mary plays up to me. If the men back there don't know you, they won't know there's been a switch. If you've fooled me, I'll use Mary to protect myself when the shootin' starts. So you'd better be sure."

Johnny said thoughtfully, "Maybe you got something, Tex. But not enough."

"What's wrong with it?"

"You tell the dicks out back that you're me. Why should they fall for it?"

"Because they don't know what's been going on in here. Because they don't know I got wise to your being a cop. It won't look unnatural to them like it does to us. I'll say you're just about to leave by the front door, and that Mary and I got to go back in. They'll believe me, thinking I'm you. They'll move around the house to tip the others off. Mary and I will go on through to the next street."

"And then?"

"I'll snag a car. Any driver will stop if a cop tells him to. I'll make the guy drive where I want. What do you think of it, kid?"

Johnny said that the first part of it sounded reasonable, but that business about the car . . . hell, in a few minutes a wail would go out to follow any car with a civilian driver and a cop and a girl in back.

"They won't see us, once we get in

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the car," explained Tex. "Mary and I will get down on the floor, keep out of sight. She won't make a move, and neither will the guy driving the car. I'll see to that."

"You won't . . ." Johnny looked beseechingly at Mary.

"Her? Not unless she forces it. Hell, fella, I like her. She's a good kid. Now, what else is wrong with my ideas?"

Johnny said, "You walk out with Mary. You got a gun on her. That wouldn't look so good."

"It won't be on her, kid. I'll have it ready, is all. I'm you, see? We walk right up to the two detectives and start talkin'. I say you went to the bathroom or something, but they better move fast." He shrugged. "So it ain't perfect — I'll give you that. But it's the best I can think of. And I can't just sit here."

Johnny looked miserable. He looked at his wife and said he guessed it had to be that way. He said, "Don't try anything funny, sweetheart. I know Tex. He'll really do what he says."

She said she understood that. But she was worried about Johnny. Tex asked why.

"Because the detectives don't know him," she said sharply. "After we're gone, Johnny will go out. They'll think he's you. They might shoot."

Johnny said, "I'll stay right here, honey. I'll telephone the station and give 'em the score. By the time they get word back here, you'll be on your way."

Tex nodded approvingly. "Give it as long as you can, kid. You got Mary to think of."

Tex changed clothes. The uniform was a pretty good fit, considering. He slipped his service revolver into Johnny's empty holster. He said, "Never thought I'd see myself rigged up like this."

Johnny said, "You'd better let me take another look out the back window, just to be sure."

Tex stood very close to him. Johnny took his time: he had to be sure, and eventually he was. The two dicks out back, he'd seen them around the second floor of the Station, but he didn't even know their names. He told that to Tex.

They looked at each other. Johnny said, "Take care of Mary, will you?"

"Sure."

She smiled at her husband. "Everything will be all right," she said.

Johnny went back into the living-room. Tex said something to Mary. Then he opened the door, and they stepped into the night. The door closed behind them.

Johnny stood motionless: tense, nervous, waiting. The play had been taken away from him now. Nothing for him to do but stand there and worry about his wife.

For what seemed an eternity there was silence. Then he heard harsh voices and the sound of a scuffle. That was what he'd been waiting for. He ran across the kitchen, flung open the back door, and went outside. A flashlight blinded him. A voice he didn't

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know came from a man he couldn't see. It said, "Hold it, fella." He froze.

Then someone came to him out of the darkness, and Mary's arms were around his neck. She was crying. She said, "Johnny darling . . . Johnny darling . . ." over and over again.

The flashlight went off. He held Mary tight and stroked her head gently. He saw seven or eight men milling around, then three of them took shape and walked over to him. A man said, "Is this Tex Graham?"

Johnny said, Yes, it was Tex Graham. He could see better now. He could see that they had Tex's hands handcuffed behind his back.

Tex said, "I didn't think you'd take that chance with Mary, kid."

Johnny didn't say anything.

"I figured you was telling the truth when you said you didn't know the two guys staked out in back."

"I was," said Johnny.

"Don't give me that. We walked up to this lad here. I started my spiel. So what happens? Before I can move, he's on me. He's got my gun hand and he's saying something to the other guy. They get me all wrapped up. It wouldn't of happened that quick if they hadn't known you."

Johnny said, "I leveled with you, Tex. But still I figured this would happen."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *How did Johnny know that the detectives wouldn't be fooled by Tex dressed in Johnny's uniform? Why did Johnny figure Tex would be nabbed and Mary would be safe?*

Tex said he didn't understand.

Johnny said, "When you suggested wearing my uniform, I pretended to oppose it. But from the beginning, I expected this to happen."

"But why, kid? *Why?*"

"Because of something you yourself said, Tex. You said the guys outside wouldn't know what had been happening in this apartment. Right. But what was the most important thing they wouldn't know? That you had found out I'm a cop. So when someone in uniform came through that back door, I figured they'd know right away it wasn't me. *They'd never believe that I changed from civvies to a uniform right in front of a man wanted by the FBI who didn't know I was a policeman!*"

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YOU CAN'T LOVE TWO WOMEN

by L. A. G. STRONG

HE HAD PLANNED IT ALL EXACTLY. Muriel was going up to town on the 1:52, and he was supposed to be going with her. They were to be independent of each other till half-past four, when he was to meet her for tea at the Chadwickes'; and they were coming home on the 6:05.

He told Muriel to start for the station ahead of him, as he might be kept late at the office. It was a necessary part of the plan that he should not arrive on the platform till a minute or so before the train started. He had taken his ticket beforehand, at the office in the town where they knew him well and where they entered up the number of each ticket in a ledger.

The train was in when he reached the incline leading up to the station, and the big engine, shining in the sunlight, let off important clouds of steam and uttered every now and again a raucous, sustained snort. Maurice pulled his hat over his forehead, took a platform ticket, and hurried through the barrier.

As he expected, Muriel was in the very front of the train. She gave him the inexpressive smile which she kept for public occasions. "I've kept a seat for you," she said, with a hint of emphasis in her tones, suggesting that the keeping had caused some resentment on the part of other occupants of the compartment. She would get her own way, but she was perhaps just as glad that he had turned up to prove that she was keeping the seat legitimately.

"Thanks." He stood fumbling at the pockets of his overcoat, which was hanging open. Then he looked up at her with a well-feigned dismay. "Oh, Lord, I've nothing to read. I must get a magazine. I've just time."

"Maurice — surely? The train's just about to start."

"That's all right. I'll get in farther down."

And he ran down the platform without waiting for further argument. General Waiting Room — this would do. He dived in, burying himself into his coat, and a minute later had the satisfaction of seeing the train slide past the yellow windows. Almost at once a little crowded local came bustling in, and it was easy to join the crowd and give up his platform ticket at the barrier; the collector was too busy to do anything but watch the hands that offered him tickets.

That was all right. He had a clear hour now. He would go back by a different bus route, which landed him half a mile from home, and get into the flat by the back way. There was a bare chance that someone he knew might see him, but it was very unlikely; and after all, one had to take

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some chances. He had lots of time to dodge back by the most improbable little streets.

What was that tag out of *Patience?* — "You can't love two women at once," or something to that effect; to which the fool answered, "Can't you though!" Maurice's face twitched. He had had ample opportunity lately to consider that proposition in all its aspects. You might be able to be in love with two women at once, but you couldn't carry on the business as if each was the only one and cope with a full day's work as well. Since Merrick had been ill, he'd had more than he could manage at the office. Scarcely time for Muriel, let alone Vera. Oh, hell, hell, hell! It all ran round in his head like Catherine wheels — great aching circles of fire. He had all he could do not to stand still and stamp on the pavement and cry out in sheer nervous exasperation at the burden of it. Steady, though! He must keep a clear head for what lay before him.

The problem was going to be solved all right — the Gordian knot cut. He gave a quick little snigger, tucking his chin down inside his coat collar. That was more like it, perhaps. *Something* had to be done. To go on as he had been was simply to court a breakdown. And he knew what a nervous breakdown meant. Collapse, mental and physical. He had had as much as he could stand — just about as much as he could stand.

No one knew him on this bus route. Strange in what narrow channels the streams of a community ran! A small town, fifty miles from London: yet by simply getting into a bus that traveled almost parallel to his own, he was plunged at once into a quite unknown stream — people whom he had never seen and who had never seen him.

It was twenty to three when he walked up the back stairs to the flat. He had put on his shoes with the rubber soles. No one heard him, no one saw him. The door opened noiselessly, and he slipped inside. He went into the little sitting-room, lit the fire, dragged the sofa forward from the wall, and drew the one curtain that faced a neighboring house. Then he went into the bedroom and returned with an eiderdown and a rug, which he threw over the end of the sofa. Back again to the bedroom, he pulled out the bottom drawer of the wardrobe, groped in the back of it, and took out a long, narrow box. There was something inside it, wrapped in tissue paper. He felt it to make sure it was there, and put the box on the bed. Lastly, he took out his wallet and looked into a pocket in which there were two or three little slips of paper. Satisfied, he laid it on the bed beside the box.

Now there was nothing to do but wait . . .

It was just seven minutes past three when his strained ears heard a light step, followed by a rattle of the letter-box. Instantly he was at the door, and the tall, graceful figure

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stood silhouetted, smiling, before him. It was a picture he had seen very often in the last six months. The same actions and sensations were precisely repeated: her soft "Hullo, Maurice, dear," the shutting of the door, the darkness, her cool fragrance as he penned her in against the wall and took her in his arms. Then, with a trembling hand, he opened the sitting-room door and she stepped in front of him, taking in everything with a glance, pulling off her fur gloves, making some trivial remark, still smiling.

What was it that made her so damnably attractive? She wasn't beautiful, with her snub nose and her wide, strong mouth. Her hands and feet were rather large, too. Yet she had some indefinable neatness, an elasticity, a buoyance in her step, the carriage of her head, something provocative and yet endearing, which made people call her "little Vera" — though, in fact, she stood well above average height. It was an outside which expressed uncommonly well her vivid, careless personality.

Her marriage had not been a success — far less of a success than his with Muriel. She admitted that. Yet she made light of it, never complained, appeared philosophically to take it as all in the game. "Oh, I thought that was part of a wife's job," she would say, and smile at him with innocent eyes as he scolded her for not resisting some fresh enormity.

He watched her now as she took off her scarf. She always stood in front of the fire to do this, and put it with her gloves on the corner of the mantelpiece. Then he would take her hand and lead her to the sofa, sitting her down beside him.

"Well, little Vera."

"Well?"

"How are you?"

"I'm all right. How are you?" — all prelude to the first kiss upon her cool, steady lips that always smelled of lavender.

Well — since he could no longer bear the strain of both — it had to be Vera or Muriel. Vera was exotic, a temptress: Muriel was his own, his companion, till death did them part. Death?

Good Lord, they were right about hell being here, on earth. Even the good times were paid for by wretched fits of nerves and depression. The notes, the furtive appointments, the necessity of finding out where Muriel was going to be — he wasn't made for carrying on an intrigue. What seemed to exhilarate some men only tormented him. The sense of treachery . . . absurd, illogical, oh, he knew that. He had reasoned it all out long ago, yet he somehow found it hard to meet Muriel's eyes.

The affair wasn't really serious in the sense that it would have been if Vera and Muriel were rivals. There was no question as to which of the two he chose to live with. In that, the fundamental sense, he was perfectly loyal. Yet, telling himself all this savagely over and over again, he felt

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guilty, and, latterly, distraught. It had become unbearable — and he would end it today. Even with the familiar cool touch of Vera's lips upon his own, he was resolute.

Gently he loosed himself from her. "Just a minute," he whispered, and made a little gesture toward the next room. She held him with her eyes, looking up into his, strangely earnest.

"Don't be long," she said.

He tried to speak, swallowed angrily, and answered, "I won't" — more loudly than he had intended: then he went out and closed the door.

Once in the bedroom, he pulled off his coat and waistcoat, rolled his sleeves up above the elbow, and took from the back of the wardrobe a faded old yellow bathgown, all stained and smeared. He had used it to protect his clothes while making up a troupe for amateur theatricals, and the front of it was a mass of dried grease paint. No one would be likely to find it, stuffed away in the bottom of the old trunk whence that morning he had taken it out.

He stood for a moment in front of the long glass, looking at himself. A pale, serious face looked back at him. The brown eyes confessed nothing of their intent. They looked the same as usual. Turning away with a sigh, he picked up the box and the wallet. This was a time to act. He did not know when another chance would come.

He went back to the sitting-room, softly closing the door behind him. Vera was kneeling on the floor in front of the fire, holding out her hands to it. The red, steady glow fell softly on her bare arms and shoulders. She did not look up as he came in.

Moving softly, he came behind her. With demoralizing suddenness, his heart began to beat frantically, like the crying of a bird upon which a cat has pounced. Steadying himself, he put the wallet on the sofa and opened the box.

Vera half-turned her head at the rustle of the tissue paper; then she leaned forward and laid it sideways on her knees, with a little contented sound. She was waiting for his arms to steal round her and draw her back to him.

Very quietly he put the box down beside the wallet. In his right hand was a long knife with a carved blade and handle, and his left hand moved across to join the other upon the long hilt. He took a step forward.

"'Mau — rice." It was a slow, lazy whisper. She would rouse and turn round. His chance would be gone.

Fixing his gaze on a point just inside her left shoulder-blade, he grasped the knife in both hands, raised it, and literally fell upon her with all his might. The blow came straight down; her body in its doubled-up position resisted the impact, and Maurice fell sprawling to one side. Picking himself up like lightning, he sprang away. The knife had gone in almost up to the hilt.

For a moment she remained doubled forward, her head on her knees. Then the head craned back; she

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tried to straighten herself up, stuck — like a hen he had seen, crushed by a car and desperately trying to rise — and fell suddenly sideways. She kicked, thrusting one foot against the stove, but seeming not to feel it; her hands reached out, clutched the sofa, and she began to drag herself up. Her head was thrown back, the forehead a mask of wrinkles, her eyes staring, fixed on the wall, seemingly quite unconscious of him; and through her open mouth she made a queer indrawn sound, "Aw-w-aw-aw-a-w —"

As he watched, she pulled the top part of her body upright, leaning backward over the knife — farther, farther back — her lips drawn away from the gums; she coughed, and went all limp, rolling over with her face toward him on the carpet. Her eyebrows rose once or twice as if in surprise. Then her face became sleepy and peaceful as a child's. She uttered a gentle little sigh, and was still.

It was a full minute before he dared to move. His hands were shaking uncontrollably in reaction from the effort. Holding them out in front of him, he steadied them somewhat by an effort of his will. Then, going as near to the window as he dared, he scanned the front of his bathgown. Not a speck of blood on it! One long streak on his right forearm — that was all. Get rid of that first.

He went swiftly into the bathroom, and in a few seconds that splash of evidence was gone. Now, then, he must get a move on. Hesitating with his hand on the door, he had the idea that when he went in he might find her sitting in front of the fire, as before. That would be disconcerting. A mistress with nine lives, eh? It was almost a relief to find her lying as he had left her. A dark stain was slowly spreading over the carpet.

He crossed to the sofa, opened the wallet, and took out the three little slips of thin paper. If they were going to get him, if he had to swing for it, he'd give the public something to talk about. This was to be no commonplace murder. Each of the little slips had typed on it a bizarre and meaningless sentence. *So time goes by, whitening old city churches*, read one. That would keep them guessing. Another was a text from the Epistle to the Romans, about Sodom and Gomorrah. They might think he was mad, but they would notice them all right. Headlines. . . . He might even get off as a madman.

The slips were typed, but not on his own typewriter. He had tapped them out under pretense of trying a machine for sale at a stationer's in the town, while the assistant was getting him a particular size of envelope he knew was kept upstairs. The paper might be identified, though he had kept the typing clear of the watermark; but what if it were? Hundreds, thousands, of people used it.

Rolling up the slips, he bent over the body, inserted one in each nostril, and the third in the mouth, between the teeth and underlip. That was all. Now to get away.

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Ten minutes later he was hurrying to the terminus of the bus which had brought him out. By good luck, he had hardly any wait at all. The winter dusk was already beginning to fall; it was a foggy, dull day.

Seated in the bus, he reviewed his plans. He had a ticket, which the clerk at the office would swear to giving him, and whose number would check in the ledger. This ticket he was now going to use. The 3:57 would get him up to town too late to join Muriel at the Chadwickes', but in plenty of time to meet her on the 6:05 and explain that his business had kept him. That business was a weak spot, of course, but he would put in one or two quick calls which would show he had at any rate been in town that afternoon. Muriel would be ready to say he had come up by the 1:52, and his ticket would be found among the day's collection at Paddington. (He only hoped they didn't check them after each train!)

At this end no one knew where Vera had gone. She lived only a few hundred yards away, and she had come straight to the flat, so that her maids would be witness that she had not left home till three. Actually, she was dead within ten minutes of entering the flat, and he was away in less than ten minutes after that. True, his alibi was flimsy, but this very point was in his favor. When on earth, his counsel would ask, could he have found time to commit the murder? The 3:57 got to town by a quarter to five. From then on he would contrive to be seen by several people. The prosecution would not have matters all their own way, even if they did run him in. Unless someone had seen him coming in or going out of the flat, and he was pretty sure nobody had.

"Have you ever seen this in your husband's possession, madam?" (Holding up the knife.)

"Never," Muriel would reply, with perfect truth; for he had bought it in an old curiosity shop in Devonport a long time ago, and it had been stowed away somewhere among his things ever since.

Or perhaps they didn't examine a wife when her husband was on trial? He couldn't remember.

When the bus reached the station, he wrapped a scarf round his mouth and scuffled through the barrier with his head down, enduring as best he could the agonizing minutes before the train arrived. It was not long, but it might have been a whole year of his life. At last the train came. Getting into a carriage crowded with country folk, he at once disappeared behind a newspaper, and, by a queer trick of the mind which came as a complete surprise to him, managed to forget what had happened for whole minutes together. He wasn't well, that's what was at the back of it all. He wasn't well; the strain had been taking it out of him frightfully.

The moment the train reached Paddington he jumped into a taxi and made for an address in Notting Hill, to a friend of his who had a

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small, one-man office, and who could therefore be relied upon to be in. Dismissing the taxi at the corner of the street, Maurice went quickly along and mounted the rickety stair. *Come in and wait — back in five minutes*, said a confiding message on a card pinned to the door. Excellent. He went in an picked up a paper. It took him two or three minutes to realize that it was the same paper he had been reading in the train.

A reckless plunging on the stair suddenly announced the owner's return, and a second later he entered.

"Oh, it's you! I say I'm awfully sorry. I was kept much longer than I expected. You haven't been waiting long I hope?"

Maurice glanced at the clock. "Not long. Only about twenty minutes."

"I say I am sorry I'd no idea."

"Oh, that's all right. I've nothing particular to do. Fact is," he forced a smile, "I was just wondering if I'd drawn another blank."

"Another?"

"Yes, I went all the way out to see Baines, and he wasn't in." That was good. It had only just come into his head. Baines *was* out that afternoon, as he happened to know. He was covering up his tracks in grand style.

"Oh, well," his host stretched out a cigarette case, "I'm glad you found me, anyway."

It hardly seemed worthwhile making other calls, after that, but he looked in at two places on his way back to the station. Then there seemed to be a queer gap in his memory, for the next thing he knew, he found himself walking up the platform carrying some of Muriel's parcels, with no clear idea of how he got there.

"Here," she said, halting beside a door, "this will do."

Going back. Home. Up from the station, up the stairs, in the door. . . .

He turned his mind away, rubbed a clear patch on the window, and tried to look out. The lights of a factory whirled derisively by. He shuddered and steeled himself to endure the long, barren, eternal journey. Why did people nod their heads in a train, the fools? His head was nodding too, he supposed. How idiotic they must all look — nodding in fatuous, rhythmic assent to some unheard proposition; replying in the only way they could devise to the unanswerable question — why did they exist at all? The whole thing was symbolic of humanity answering the major riddles — obstinate, endless assertion instead of reason.

And other questions. Was she dead? *Nod — nod — nod.* Did they know who had killed her? *Nod — nod.* Would he be caught? *Nod — nod — nod.* Would he hang?

The train rushed over the joints of a junction and swung away on a new path into the darkness.

And every nod, every clitter-clock, clitter-clock of the wheels, was carrying him so much nearer to — to what had happened. He turned his

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mind away resolutely and tried to read the back of the man's paper opposite. Muriel was in her corner, her eyes closed, one hand delicately against her cheek. She met all the disagreeable things of life like that, gracefully, fastidiously. Her composure was very precious to her. Well, she'd need it soon.

He fell to reviewing all the steps he had taken to build up an alibi. Flimsy enough, they looked — full of great black gaps through which the huge arm of the law could suddenly shoot and grab him. A light shiver ran down his spine. But, so far, he was not so much frightened of the consequences as curious — academically, disinterestedly curious — to see how it would all work out. Would the local police tackle it, or would they call in the Yard at once? Recalling himself with a jolt, he fixed his eyes upon the joggling paper opposite him, and with great concentration read something very silly about an actress who was being sued for breach of contract.

At last, after ages so long that his whole life and several previous existences seemed to have been spent in the same hideous compartment, the train slowed down, and they stepped out into the chill air of the platform. They took a taxi, because of Muriel's parcels. In precisely the same way as one turns one's mind away while the dentist fixes a drill in his machine, Maurice turned his mind to any externals it could seize upon during the journey up.

"Two and six, is it?" he was repeating presently. "Two and six, eh?" And he took the money out of his pocket and counted it over twice, with great deliberation, before the action would register in his consciousness at all. "Oh, ah, yes — two and six." The man was looking at him. "Well, here you are. Good night."

He was walking up the stairs, his arms full of parcels. His heart seemed to be beating distinctly, sharply, rather than fast; and at once he saw a picture of it, as a sort of cylinder with two convex ends, swinging imperatively against the surrounding tissues.

"All right. I have a key."

Muriel's manner seemed a bit constrained. She had looked at him strangely, he thought. Pooh! All fancy. It shows how one's conscience can run away with you. Oh, Lord, here they were, in the dark little hall, only a few yards, only a door away from it! He almost ran down the passage to the bedroom, stumbling in at the door, and shedding his parcels on the bed in a heap. He kept his back turned on Muriel, for the lower part of his face seemed to have become all loose and uncontrolled. Muriel put down her bag, took off her hat, leaned forward to scrutinize her face in the dressing-table mirror; then went out of the room, without speaking.

Sick and shaking, he caught hold of the bedpost and held on. She went along the passage. She was outside

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the living-room door. No — she had gone into the bathroom. He brushed his forehead and tried vainly to moisten his lips. This was awful, awful, his mind kept saying. It — ah. She had come out again. He heard her turn the handle of the living-room door, switch on the light. . . . Shutting his eyes, he nerved himself for her scream.

It did not come. He could hear her moving about in the room. He — she — oh, Lord, this was past all bearing, worse than any outcry. Something told him that his eyes were staring in his head; he ducked, not daring to look in the glass, and ran out into the passage, falling, lurching, swaying, with hands outstretched against the cold walls; tottered to the open door of light; grasped the doorpost, the knuckles sticking out white from the back of his hand, and, with a rending, terrible effort, pulled himself into the room and looked on the floor in front of the fireplace.

There was nobody. Nothing at all.

"Ah — ha — ha-ha!" A little, shrill, whimpering laugh sounded in the room, and he realized that it had come from his own throat. Frantically he raised his eyes. Muriel was staring at him in amazement and distaste.

"Whatever is the matter with you, Maurice!" she exclaimed.

"The matter?"

"Yes." She came a step nearer. "You've been behaving in the queerest way all afternoon." She gave a half-laugh, looking closely into his eyes. "You haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Queer? I — why, what's been the matter with me?" He got the words out, but all the time his mind was trying to cope with the staggering thing she had just said. *All afternoon.* Queer all afternoon. That's what she had said.

Muriel laughed again. It was her way of turning aside her irritation. "I don't know what's the matter with you," she answered. "All I know is that you've been behaving very queerly all afternoon. They were all wondering what was the matter with you. I could see they were."

His mouth fell open. "They — who were?"

"Why, at the Chadwickes', of course. You wouldn't say a word to a soul, except once, when you were quite unnecessarily rude to old General McKie."

"At the Chadwickes'!" he shouted. "You don't know what you're saying! At the Chadwickes'?"

"Why, Maurice, what*ever* is the matter with you! Of course you were at — oh, my darling! Maurice!"

For he had begun to laugh — soundlessly at first, a horrible, silent shaking; and then he was screaming, sobbing, laughing, calling out . . .

How soon afterward he did not know, he found himself on his knees, holding on tight to her, his head in her lap; and she was stroking his hair, soothing him, comforting him

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as if he were a tiny child. "There, there, my darling, it will be all right. There's nothing to be frightened of. Nothing. Nothing."

And presently he was calmer; quite quiet. He knelt, his arms around her, looking over toward the bookcase with wide eyes, realizing the truth. The breakdown — what he had been afraid of — had come. This was it; all this. Everything. He had spent the afternoon unconsciously, an automaton, while his consciousness had been busy . . . here. The whole story — the precautions, the details, the vivid enactment — he could see it all now, the fantastic, pettifogging logic of the disordered mind. And the imagination — what he had done to Vera. Good God, if that was delusion, what was there to hold on to in life?

Steady — that was the way to go off again. He held on tight to Muriel for a minute.

"Do you know," he blurted, "I thought I'd ——" And then he broke off short. He'd have enough troubles without that. Least said, eh?

With gradually narrowing eyes, he listened to all the soothing things Muriel was saying over the top of his head. She'd been noticing how tired he was getting, how overworked. He needed a change. A nice rest, and a change. They'd go off together —

"That knife," he exclaimed suddenly, looking up at her. "I haven't had that for years. I remember now. I gave it away, years ago."

"Yes, darling. Of course you did. Don't worry about it any more," and she went on again, how all he needed was a rest. Then he realized he needn't trouble to guard his tongue. Anything he said would be attributed to his breakdown. Poor little Muriel! She was frightened, badly frightened, and putting a splendidly brave face on it.

He got up and sat beside her on the sofa, putting his arms around her, telling her not to be frightened.

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Remember Mike Russell, the big-hearted, warm-hearted detective in Charlotte Armstrong's "The Enemy," which won the $2000 First Prize in EQMM's Sixth Annual Contest? Well, here is Mike Russell involved in another murder investigation — or, as he himself puts it, "I'm here to be on your side, if and when it becomes necessary."

Almost nothing is known about Mike Russell — who he really is, where he comes from. He is a sort of Mysterious Stranger, ever ready to help people in trouble. In "The Enemy," he helped a young boy whose dog had been killed; in "The Evening Hour," he helps a white-haired grandmother accused of murdering her employer. Always standing by, his hand and heart and mind in the service of the underdog, young or old, regardless of race, color, or creed . . . the man of good will . . . and oh, how we need more of them these dark days!

Yes, there is something mystical about Mike Russell. For all his flaming youth, he is a rather old-fashioned kind of man. When asked by people in trouble what they can do, Mike Russell is not ashamed, in these cynical and sophisticated times, to reply: "We can pray." But Mike's feet are solidly on the ground: yes, we can pray, but he knows what to pray for — "for something tangible, something we can offer as proof . . ."

THE EVENING HOUR

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

DICK HUNTER SWUNG HIS CAR IN toward the curb where, looking pinched and chilly in the early fog, his sister Marjorie was standing. "You be out there," he'd commanded, on the phone. "Quicker to pick you up in front of the hospital. You just be there." Now their eyes met in one quick look. He knew his were impatient and even hostile. She got in as if fright and bewilderment were making her clumsy. He sent the car forward and it scuttered through the scattered traffic, hunting, in this dim and unreal dawn, the quickest way.

"Who called *you*? Parrish? What'd he tell *you*?" he snapped.

"Just . . . that Mr. Gittens is dead. Mother must see us . . ."

"Didn't say he'd been shot? Didn't mention the police?"

"N-no . . . *You* said . . ."

"They figured to spare you," said Dick grimly. "There was murder in that house last night and mother's mixed up in it."

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"She can't be!"

"She is."

His sister whimpered. She was the baby, little and fair. Now the starched look of crisp competence, that nurse's look she wore in her work, that cocky air of knowing just a bit more about some important mysteries than the lay person — all that was gone.

"Listen, Marjie, we don't know a damned thing . . ." He couldn't express what he was thinking. He let it go. The thing was to drive fast and get there, to that house in Pasadena where their mother lived with strangers.

He thought bitterly of his ignorance. He and Celia and the kids, putting on their act, when mother came. Look, mother. Aren't we doing well? Aren't the kids cute? Isn't the house charming? Doesn't my Celia run it cleverly? Am I not smart at the office? Look, mother, look at me!

Thirty-one years of it, he thought, beginning with mud pies. Look what I made, mother! Crayon drawings. Report cards. The baseball letter. The piece in the college paper. Look, mother!

And mother looks, year in, year out. Mother says, "Why, that's *good*, dear!"

He groaned, thinking how glibly he and Celia spoke of her, entertaining their friends with this. Dick's mother is a spunky little character. You ought to meet her. First thing we knew, after Dick's father died, here's Mum with a job. Answered an ad in the paper, imagine! And comes up with this juicy position as companion to this wealthy old dame. Travels, mind you! All over the world! Lives in the lap of luxury in a Pasadena mansion, when they're not in Rio or Honolulu. Really wonderful!

Was it? he thought. *Is it?* Mother's life with these strangers, this Mr. and Mrs. Lewis C. Gittens . . . one dead, as of this morning, and one dying. "We don't *know*!" he repeated aloud.

"Will it be in the papers?" his sister said shrinkingly.

"Oh, yes. No doubt." It'll be a sensation, he thought, in your tight little world at the hospital, among the internes, and your chums and your dates. And in my little world, my happy-young-couple-with-two-small-children world, too.

"That's not the point," he said savagely.

It was an old house, an "eastern" house, clapboard and shingle, turrets and gingerbread, three stories high. Mrs. Hunter's son and daughter had never been inside its walls. Here, if anywhere, their mother lived, but it was a home not open to them. *Or was it?* Dick thought. *We never tried.*

He took Marjorie by the arm and brusquely, propelled by his deep anger with himself, he marched up the stoop and rang the bell.

A houseman in a white coat let them in. A tense, skinny, elderly little man stepped briskly through an arch. "Mr. and Miss Hunter? I'm Charles Parrish. Spoke to you on the phone. Come in." They went past a third man, sitting on a tapestried bench

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with the air of being a spectator here. Police, Dick thought. And there was yet a fourth man in the corner of a sofa. But eyes and mind flew forward to where his mother was, there, in the drawing-room, in the big brown chair.

He caught her hands up, kissed her cheek. "O.K. Mum?" His voice came out light and almost gay.

But he was looking at a weary and disheveled woman. The whole room spoke of a vigil. It wore a night look, as if it had not realized the morning. Lamps burned, last night's drinking glasses, a cup and a saucer, stood there, and ashtrays unwashed. Mrs. Margaret Hunter, in her white-trimmed, dark blue silk, her neat navy shoes, lay crumpled in the chair. The snowy mass of her abundant hair was slipping from its high knot, the tousled, untidy, wisp-flying look of it was shocking. Her dark eyes, always so unexpected in her soft-skinned, delicately tinted face, were, for a moment, a stranger's eyes.

But Marjorie (*little fool*, thought her brother) went down on her knees, whimpering. "It's all right, baby," mother said. (It was mother, after all.) "There's been so much confusion . . . It'll be straightened out soon . . ." Her hand, in that old loving gesture, was petting and smoothing the girl's fair hair. "Did Mr. Parrish wake you?" she inquired fondly of Marjorie.

Dick said, "Why didn't you call us sooner? When did this happen? What . . . ?"

"Mrs. Hunter wouldn't allow me," the old man, Parrish, was weary, too. "You see . . . Mrs. Gittens . . . so ill . . . the doctor upstairs . . . *her* son, also . . ." His eyebrows filled out his sentences. "I fear . . . in fact, we were informed . . . Mrs. Gittens has just passed away." The vigil, then, had been a death watch. Mother's hand kept soothing, stroking . . .

Charles Parrish's claw nipped at Dick's sleeve, turned him around. ". . . to meet a young friend . . . I, as the family's lawyer and, of course, well acquainted with Mrs. Hunter, presumed . . . I hope you will approve . . . This is Mr. Archibald Russell . . . er . . . 'Mike' Russell . . . better versed than I in . . . er . . . criminal law . . ."

"Forget the Archibald," the dark young man unfolded himself from the sofa, grinned, and shook Dick's hand. "Good morning. I'm here to be on your side, if and when it becomes necessary."

"There was a crime?" Dick said tensely.

"Yes."

"Who . . . did it? What . . .?"

"We aren't quite sure," said the young man softly. "Lieutenant Doyle is upstairs . . . no, he's here."

A man, fortyish, sturdy, compact, came into the room a step ahead of a thin, weedy, younger chap on whose short upper lip a small mustache rode like a pale brown sneer.

"Lieutenant, this is Richard Hunter and Miss Marjorie Hunter. And Mr. David Keyes . . ." Parrish broke off

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to say gently, "My dear David, may I express my sympathy . . . your dear mother's passing . . ."

"I've called . . . the right people," David Keyes said in a high, nervous voice. "I don't think there is anything to do until they come. Mrs. Chew is . . . with her. If you don't mind," his eyes slid around to the white-haired woman in the chair with a certain distaste, "please make yourselves at home, but . . . you must excuse me."

Mrs. Hunter's lips had opened as if to speak, but she had not spoken. The young chap went away, withdrawing into some recess of the house with that air of fastidious dislike.

Dick swallowed anger. "*And* if you don't mind," he said ominously, "I would like to be told what has been going on here."

"Tell us, Lieutenant," said the dark young man, this Russell, in a wheedling tone.

"Mrs. Hunter your client, Mike?"

"If she needs me."

"Sit down," said Doyle.

"Marjie, please, dear," Mrs. Hunter said and some strain thinned the gentleness of her voice, "don't kneel!"

Dick whirled and lifted his sister roughly. "For gosh sake," he said in her ear, "quit asking Mum to kiss it and make it well." He shook her, secretly, as he thrust her into a seat.

Doyle did not sit down. He looked around at them. His gray eyes, narrow and intent, summoned them to listen to the facts.

"Dinner here was at seven last night. Mrs. Grace Gittens did not come down but had a tray. At nine, Mrs. Chew, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Hunter, having prepared her for the night, they . . . and Mr. Gittens . . . left her room. Mrs. Chew retired to her own place on the third floor. Mr. Gittens and Mrs. Hunter then came down and sat together in the sun room."

The sun room, he told them with his hand, was there, through an arch at the drawing-room's far end. No sun came into it now. Monk's-cloth draperies muffled all the glass.

"Alfred Martz, the houseman, went out at a few minutes after nine to call on a friend in the neighborhood. At ten fifteen, he was returning. That is, he was standing on the back stoop, key in one hand and watch in the other, wondering whether to come in so early or go on to a bar, when he heard a revolver shot inside the house.

"On the third floor, the housekeeper was awakened by the noise and sat up in bed. Martz recovered his wits quickly, unlocked the back door, rushed through the kitchen and pantry to this hall. Grace Gittens, in her night clothing, was standing at the foot of the stairs. Mr. Gittens was slumped in that wing-chair facing us, there in the sun room. Martz looked across this room which was lighted about as it is now, saw him, and saw Mrs. Hunter bending over him, calling his name.

"Before he could move, Mrs. Gittens cried out these words: 'It was Margaret Hunter who did that.

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Margaret Hunter killed him'." And Doyle paused.

"Hearsay?" said Russell mildly in the thickening silence.

Doyle glanced at him with pure contempt, ignored the interruption, and went on. "Mrs. Gittens then collapsed. Mrs. Hunter ran to her, saying, and again I quote Martz, 'Oh, Martz, he's dead! Somebody shot. It killed him!' By now, the housekeeper was at the top of this first flight. The three of them carried Mrs. Gittens up to her bed. Martz called Dr. Allsberry and then Headquarters."

The Lieutenant cleared his throat. "On our arrival we found Mr. Gittens dead in that chair. The bullet had entered his throat."

"Not suicide?" said Russell.

"No," said Doyle flatly. "Shot was fired from ten to twenty feet away. The bullet came from a gun kept loaded in a drawer of that table." He indicated a massive mahogany piece there in the drawing-room. "We found the gun on the tiled floor of the sun room. Near it was a heavy velvet cloth, a table cover or throw. There are no fingerprints on the gun. And no traces of having discharged a gun on the bare hands of Mr. Gittens himself, Mrs. Gittens, Mrs. Chew, or Mrs. Hunter, although these four were the only people in this locked house. The killer, you see, wrapped the gun. . . ."

"That's ridiculous!" Dick Hunter cried, and then faltered, but he had to go on. "For heaven's sakes, Mum," he scoffed, "you wouldn't even know about such things . . . fingerprints and skin tests . . ."

"Of course I know about such things," said his mother quietly. "I read, Dick. We all listened to the radio so much . . ." Her head rolled on the chair's cushioning back. Her son looked at her tired smile and he thought, My Gosh, I haven't the faintest idea what she knows or what she doesn't know!

"But you can't seriously . . . !" he cried.

Doyle said, "Mrs. Gittens recovered consciousness. Knowing she was dying, she made a statement. Witnessed by several of us, taken down, and, in fact, signed. Mrs. Gittens stated that she saw Mrs. Margaret Hunter fire the revolver."

Marjorie Hunter made a choking sound and fell forward and was on her knees again with her fair head buried on her mother's arm. Something picked Dick up and moved him as if he'd been a wooden checker on a painted board, across the room to his mother's side. "Mum," he said in complete panic, "you mustn't worry. Not for a minute! They can't. . . ."

Some mask pulled over her face, some strength put it there. "Of course not . . . hush. There's been a mistake," she soothed. "Poor Grace was confused, somehow. I told Lieutenant Doyle, the shot came from behind me. It passed me close. . . ." For a moment, through the mask, her eyes looked not at the present room, but into the past.

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"You say you were seated on that wicker love-seat?" It jutted, back to this room, across the arched opening of the sun room where Doyle was pointing.

Mrs. Hunter's eyes came a long way back. She put her hand on the girl's head. "Yes," she said faintly, carelessly. "Hush, Marjie . . ."

"Mummy, you didn't. . . . They can't say that. . . . It's wicked. . . ."

"Of course, baby . . ." said mother. "Hush. . . ."

Mike Russell yanked up his trouser leg, displaying a wild yellow and red plaid sock. "Hm," he said. "So Mrs. G. was not awakened by the shot, eh? What was she doing downstairs, that she saw all this?"

"I dunno, Mike," confessed Doyle with a certain humility.

And Mrs. Hunter's dark eyes went to the young lawyer with quick and almost comradely respect. Like one grown-up to another, thought her son and clenched his hands. He thought, We're not helping her. "Cut that out, Marjie," he said sharply. He thought, Mother's been living among the Lord knows what passions and strains we never heard of, and even now, we force her to comfort us.

He made himself go back to the chair. He said, as calmly as he could, "What motive do you believe my . . . Mrs. Hunter had to do such a thing?"

"I dunno," said Doyle frankly.

"A good question," said Mike Russell softly, "a very good question."

"Well . . . there were hysterics and high words in Mrs. Gittens's bedroom yesterday afternoon, or so they tell me." The Lieutenant threw this out. The remark seemed to lie on the rug, among them.

Dick met his mother's eyes and tried to smile. "Do you know what that was about, Mum?" he asked quietly.

"Of course, dear. We all know. Poor Grace, you see, found out that her health. . . . In fact, that she was going to die, quite soon. The doctor. . . ."

"The doctor told me," said Doyle, unabashed. "Said she asked for it when he was here about noon. Seems she fooled him. Some people can take it, and he thought she could take it. But I guess she was pretty upset."

"She was terribly . . . resentful," murmured Mrs. Hunter.

"Doc left her sedatives, he says."

"They couldn't have been strong enough," Mrs. Hunter sighed.

"Money here," said Doyle, looking around him. "So, speaking of motive, what about legacies?"

"Dear me, I . . . well, I can tell you, of course," said Mr. Parrish. "Odd situation." He got to his feet, as if he could speak better standing up. "The Gittenses were married only four years ago. He has a daughter, married and living in Texas. She has a son . . . er . . . here. That is, in Los Angeles. Now, they had not drawn new wills since the marriage. I've positively nagged . . . However . . ." he touched his glasses. "Mr.

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Gittens never approved of young David Keyes. There was unpleasantness between them whenever they tried to discuss the terms of new documents. And, as a matter of fact, their property was not community property because of this perennial dispute. The fact is, now, it makes rather a difference which of the . . . er . . . couple died first."

He looked about and seemed to relish all these pricked-up ears. "He, you see, had a great deal of property. She had some. Now, Mr. Gittens having predeceased her, she takes her share as *his* surviving spouse and that share plus all of her own goes to David."

"Whereas," said Russell quickly, "otherwise, *he* would have taken his survivor's share of her little lot, and that and all his, to the daughter."

"Exactly."

"A difference in cold cash," said Russell, "to Mr. David Keyes."

"Quite a difference."

Marjorie was biting a fingernail, looking less lost.

"Did," asked Dick, slowly, thinking it out, "er . . . David know what the doctor had told his mother?"

"Oh, yes," said Doyle with an air of lying low. "He was here in the afternoon."

"And where was David in the evening?" asked Russell.

"At the theater with five friends in the fifth row," answered Doyle, "and between the acts, since he is not a smoker, he remained in the fifth row, between two ladies."

The Lieutenant turned his head. "I asked about legacies."

Old Mr. Parrish drew himself up. "There is no legacy to Mrs. Hunter," he announced stiffly.

"So . . . what motive?" asked Russell softly.

"None," exploded Dick, suddenly furious that they should sit and discuss this sort of thing before her face.

He lost his place for a moment in the storm of this emotion. Then he realized the Lieutenant was talking. "You'd say you were all friends, would you, Mrs. Hunter? You did get along all right with the old man?"

She said, wearily, "It was a very pleasant household. But now . . ." Her hands fell apart, signifying an end.

"Now," said Dick grimly, rising to his feet, "now, since you seem to have been sitting up here all night, Mum, it is high time you got some rest. I'm taking you home to Celia."

"Oh, she dozed a bit in the chair," said Parrish with a flutter.

"Goodness, did I?" said Mrs. Hunter a bit breathlessly.

This exchange did not quite cover up the silence, the wordlessness of Lieutenant Doyle, and the intent listening of young Mr. Russell to that silence.

Then Russell unwound himself and stood up. Little old Mr. Parrish bounced up. Marjorie gathered her feet under her.

"Where do you live, Hunter?" Doyle said at last.

"Santa Monica," said Dick.

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"I'd rather she stayed here in this town."

"But not in this house, of course," said Russell immediately. "Hotel, eh? Good. I can fix it. I suppose you children will want to stick around?"

Dick thought, I'm at least five years older than he is. Marjorie must have heard that sting in his tone, too, for she said with a faint return of her normal crispness, "Naturally."

"No, dears . . ." said their mother weakly, "you have your affairs . . ."

"Fix it," said Dick flatly.

They wrapped their mother in a coat and took her away from there just as she was. Old Mr. Parrish tottered wearily in a direction of his own, but young Mr. Russell, without asking, got into Dick's car, too. At the hotel, not asking, he came up to the rooms with them. They were, Dick realized, frantically anxious that he should. He must. For what do you say to your mother who may be arrested for killing a man? What do you say? What do you do? You do not weep. You cannot say, "Mother, never mind . . ." You cannot ask her to comfort *you.*

When Russell ambled in after them and took off his topcoat, Mrs. Hunter seemed to relax as if she, too, was glad of his presence.

Marjorie stacked and plumped the pillows on the clean hotel bed, took off her mother's shoes, pulled the spread up over her feet. Acting like a nurse, thought Dick, which she knows how to do. Russell suggested breakfast and it was Marjorie who phoned for it. All this filled in only a very little time.

"What now?" Dick said it.

Russell lounged in the hotel's chair, extended long legs, and crossed wild red and yellow ankles. "Now," he said cheerfully, "we find out what really happened, because Margaret is going to tell us."

A shadow crossed Mrs. Hunter's face.

"Marjorie," said Russell, "may I? Thank you. I can't bear even to think Miss Hunter. Call me Mike. Anybody named Archibald Percival naturally has to become either Pat or Mike or just possibly Joe. You're Dick. And she, of course, is Margaret. Peggy, do they ever say?"

"They used to," Margaret said.

Dick thought, He is right. This is the way. A dear friend in trouble, she must seem to us now. A woman whose life we don't know much about. But now we need to know and she must feel free. We are not children.

He straddled a chair, he felt himself grin. "O.K., Peggy, now that there's only us chickens around," he said, "take down your hair."

Russell flaunted one of his bright ankles. "Yeah, what kind of old biddy was this Grace Gittens, anyhow?"

Margaret Hunter smiled mistily on them both, but a flicker of her eye was on Marjorie's face . . . tense Marjorie with the frightened eyes that still said, Mother, make it well.

"Grace was a very nice woman," she began primly.

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"Religious?" said Russell.

"No."

"Superstitious, then?"

"No, she prided herself . . ."

"Dying, for her, was dust to dust?"

"I . . . think so."

"Scared green . . . raised hell . . ."

"Well, she did," said Margaret Hunter with a tinge of anger. "She behaved pretty badly."

"Had a time with her, I'll bet."

"We did that," said Margaret, surrendering suddenly and speaking out. "She certainly did carry on. Those sedatives had no more effect . . . We were exhausted when she finally thought she might doze off, and she let us go."

"You must have relished some peace and quiet."

Her whole face winced. "We were terribly concerned, of course," she murmured and she hid her eyes.

"This Lewis Gittens, was he a nice guy?"

"Very nice. A fine gentleman."

Then Russell said, directly and soberly, "What was your relationship with those people?"

"I . . ." Her eyes flew to her children.

"She was your employer?"

"Yes. That is, I was hired to be her companion. You see, she liked to travel and he did not. Between trips, I acted more or less as her secretary."

"It wasn't unusual for you to sit with Mr. Gittens in the sun room, as you were sitting last evening?"

"Not at all. In fact, you see . . . Grace retired so early . . . every night at nine. And I . . . did not. There was always an evening hour or perhaps a little longer, when he and I —" the pronouns betrayed her — "would sit quietly. Perhaps I'd sew. Or we might listen to some music. Not often even chatting." She closed her eyes. "As you say, there was peace," she murmured.

Dick thought with a pang that he had never even met this dead Mr. Gittens. "You were friends, Mum?" he said.

"We were all good friends," she said chidingly.

"Did Grace Gittens mind, I wonder?" Russell looked dreamily at the ceiling.

"Mind?"

"Mind the undeniable, inescapable, thunder-and-lightning fact that it *was* peaceful during that evening hour?"

Nobody answered. Marjorie stirred. "Mum, you've got to rest." Her eyes were hot and sulky on the young man's face. "*You* talk too much."

"She needs her breakfast, child," said Russell softly, but with that sting. Then he said carelessly, "I suppose Grace shot him, eh?"

Marjorie gasped. Mrs. Hunter raised herself on her elbow. "As a matter of fact, I think so," she said. "There was someone in the drawing-room. He saw that. I . . . would have looked behind me in a moment but . . ." she fell back weakly, "there was the shot . . ."

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"Hear anything?"

"Yes. Yes. A kind of breathing. Sobbing breathing." Mrs. Hunter raised her dark eyes. "But what can I say? How will it ever be known? You see, she was in such a state. She had lashed herself into this frenzy. She couldn't sleep, I suppose. She must have come down and . . ." she stopped and added lamely, "she was out of her mind."

"Come down," said Russell dreamily, "looking for someone to listen to her terrible woe . . . and run slambang into . . . peace. There was this peace. And she, going to go, screaming 'No!' . . . to her cold grave, and leave him to be cozy and quiet in the living world . . ."

"Out of her mind . . ." said Mrs. Hunter faintly.

"But not so far that she forgot about the fingerprints," mused Russell. "She must have been an old devil, if you'll pardon me."

"No," said Mrs. Hunter. "No; perhaps she was restless and self-centered . . ."

"Self-centered," cried Dick with his hair stirring in horror. "But she lied, dying! Mum, she *lied* and said she saw you!"

A boy with breakfast knocked on the door. Marjorie stirred and dealt with this. She served her mother. Moving crisply, she served them all.

Russell paid her no more attention than he would have paid a waitress. He stirred his coffee. "These deathbed statements," he said resignedly. "Y'know, the respect we have for them is a leftover, dates back to pious times. The reason we figure a dying man's not going to lie is because he thinks he'll go to hell if he does. But suppose he doesn't believe in heaven or hell? Suppose she isn't religious?"

"She was a devil," Dick groaned.

"She did lie." Marjorie said, suddenly, "Maybe to protect her son."

"What?"

"He'll get that money."

Russell smiled. "You're not dreaming that little David rigged his alibi?" Marjorie looked angry. "You'd like that, dear," said Russell. "We all would. But don't dream. 'Tain't going to be."

"No, no," said Marjorie, "that isn't what I meant. Look, because of the order in which they died, he gets Mr. Gittens's money *through her*. But she couldn't inherit her husband's money if she killed him. Could she?"

"Hah!" said Russell. "The ingenious mind. You read 'em, too, don't you, dear? Might do, at that," he said cynically. "There's a mighty strong tradition, too. Mothers live for the kids alone. Mother, legend says, will do anything for her child, though he's left the nest, though he be grown." His eyes rested on Marjorie's reddening face. "Why, my! Whatever else has *she* got to live for?"

Dick thought, Let one good-looking young guy she's never seen in her life before hint all this, and *now* she *gets* what a mere brother couldn't tell her in a million tries.

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"And so," Russell went on, "we can put up this alternative theory to occupy the minds of the jury, eh? Mrs. G. is hysterical. She's going to die, and oh, me, what about those wills? And baby David would so like the money. So she thinks, Mama will fix. So she quick shoots her husband. However, a bit later she realizes she'd better fasten the deed on somebody else, say a perfectly innocent and friendly woman, or baby-boy won't get the money after all. Oh, me," said Mr. Russell. "Mother love . . . Still, providing she had any least little grudge against Margaret, here, why, could be she was thinking of Davey-boy when she lied . . ."

Marjorie said with outraged eyes, "If you are suggesting that my mother was having an . . ."

"Ah . . . ah . . ." said Russell. He elevated a leg to the arm of the chair and his bright sock gleamed. "Funny thing," he mused, "a young girl like you, sis, you'll have your dates. 'May I have the pleasure of your company?' your beau says. 'Why, yes,' says you. And the hunts or the skirmishes those dates may be in the secret jungle life of the courting young, *you know*. But you *don't* know, when a woman's kids are grown and gone and she finds herself alive . . . sometimes 'the pleasure of her company' is a real . . . sweet . . . fact . . ."

"That will do, I think," said Mrs. Hunter quietly.

"Ma'am," said Russell, "forgive me, please."

There was silence. "What is likely to happen, Mr. Russell?" said Marjorie, sharply.

"Hm? Oh, I'll tell you," he said. "And it ain't good. No, it ain't. Although, I don't think it's dangerous. Too much doubt. And no motive. They've really got to have some hint of a motive. The likeliest thing, I am sorry to say, is that you will all have to go through a long and pretty terrible ordeal. Your mother will be dragged about. Press, you know, and all that. But I don't think, in the end, she's in danger." He paused. "We'll do what we can."

"What can we do?"

"We can pray," said Russell. He got up and took a turn on the floor. "Two bad the curtains were drawn in that sun room. We won't dig up any stray witnesses. Fact, I don't know what we *can* get. It'll be a character thing . . . reasonable doubt and so on. And sometimes that's tough."

Margaret Hunter's face was agonized.

"I'll tell you what to pray for," Russell said. "Pray for something tangible, something we can offer as proof. Physical proof. Good old science. A material fact. Something to show either that Mrs. Hunter could not possibly have fired that shot or that Mrs. Gittens must have."

"But *what*?"

"I dunno what. Probably there'll be no such thing. I'm only telling you what would stop . . . what's likely to happen."

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Margaret looked sick at heart.

"Well," said Dick, "you put it up to us good and plain, Mike. I suppose we ought to thank you for that. So what do we do? Why, we go through it. We come out on the other side, some day."

He wanted to weep, to howl, to cry, *Mummy* . . . and thinking he'd hidden that under a brave speech he was astonished to hear Marjorie say, crisply, "Shut up, Dick. Stop yowling. Mum's tired." She took the tray away from her mother. She sat down on the bed and put her clean nurse's hand with its immaculate unpainted nails on her mother's cheek. She said, "And she's bothered. Look. Mum, we'd better face it. You're a pretty lovely lady." There were two women, suddenly, looking at each other. "You were fond of him," Marjorie said, "and he of you, naturally. We'd better admit it. So why would *you* do it. How can *you* be guilty?"

"I am guilty," said Margaret Hunter.

Her son's heart turned over in pure pity, just pity, great sadness and great pity.

But her daughter smiled and said, "Uh huh. How?"

"How?" Their mother's dark eyes opened.

"How do you figure that?" said Marjorie. "You kinda loved him, or he was . . . at least . . . dear to you. And I know you're grieving." Woman looked at woman. "But what are you holding back?"

Dick held his breath. "She . . . put us through such a harrowing day," said Margaret Hunter brokenly. "We knew . . . too, it might go on until the day she'd die. So . . . after we'd sat quietly a while . . . he couldn't help breaking down a little. He . . . begged me for help. It was the first, the only time we spoke of ourselves. He asked if I would surely . . . see him through what was going to be. I . . . vowed I would. That I wanted to . . . I was kneeling . . . at his feet . . . When she came down, she saw us. And he . . . and he straightened up. There were tears on my face and I didn't look. But I think she shot at *me*," said Margaret Hunter.

"Guilty," said Marjorie softly. "Ah, you goose!" She turned around. "You men get out of here. Mummy, you'll get to bed now. Get to sleep. To rest. Don't you see," said Marjorie to the men, "she's got to grieve. She's got to cry."

Russell saluted the girl with two fingers to his forehead. He got up and started for his topcoat. Dick drifted with him. He, himself, could not have spoken a word without a sob.

Marjorie was using that old, old loving gesture, while Margaret wept in her arms. Marjorie was soothing and petting the tousled white hair. She began to slip hairpins out of the mass. She ran her fingers back from the brow.

She said, in a voice of utter astonishment, "What in the world . . .!"

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She was holding up a long strand of white hair that had separated strangely from the rest.

Russell yelled, "Don't touch it! Don't move! Either of you! Sit still. Be quiet." He dashed to the phone. "Outside wire. Get Doyle," he explained. "This is it! Who was praying? Who's got the ear of the Lord like that!"

Mrs. Hunter stared at him.

"Lieutenant Doyle?" he yelled into the mouthpiece. "Yes, yes, I'll wait." He covered the mouthpiece and beamed at them. "The cook woke up only once . . . and you in full view . . . Ah, that's nonsense. Not important. Naturally, you couldn't have pinned up your hair and it cut like that. And all night you sat in the chair . . ."

"In the building?" he barked to the phone. "Good. I'll hang on." He waved the phone jubilantly. "He says, 'Peg, take your hair down,' he says! And by golly, at last she does!"

"What are you talking about?" said Dick.

"Who? Me? Hah! I shall inquire of the Lieutenant," said Russell, full of glee, "how a woman can possibly take a revolver and point it at the bun on the top of her, from the front, back, or sideways, and shoot a man *through* it?"

"The bullet went through her hair! She might have been . . .!" Dick staggered.

"But she wasn't. She's saved by a hair!" cried Russell kicking a leg high.

"Hairs-breadth escape!" cried Dick, leaping where he stood.

Marjorie stroked her mother's hand. "Never mind them. It's just their boyish way of being glad."

"You . . . good kids," said mother. And she thought, Even sorrow dies . . .

"I know," said Marjorie.

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

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KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in the Saturday Review of Literature*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the Saint Louis Post Dispatch*

JS: *James Sandoe in the New York Herald Tribune*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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THE CASE OF THE BLUE FOOTPRINTS

by AUSTIN RIPLEY

FROM THE OPEN WINDOW (OUTSIDE of which stood a tall ladder) at the end of the long hall, to a settee beneath a portrait of an eighteenth-century Scot in kilts, the set of muddy footprints was easily followed. There they ended.

"Maybe the bra' laddie has 'em hid under yon kilts," Inspector Kelley observed facetiously.

Twenty feet farther down the hall, Professor Fordney re-entered the bedroom where Donald McLennan lay in his bed, bludgeoned to death. Signaling Kelley to switch on the lights, he went to his knees.

From door to bed and return he observed under his glass a number of faint, incomplete right-foot marks. He was confident they were made by a shoeless, tiptoeing person. Nowhere were impressions of a left foot found. A singular puzzling fact was that the prints were of a faint bluish color; the blue a trifle deeper in the center.

"So," the Inspector snorted, "a one-legged pixie playing hopscotch on tiptoe bounces in here, ups with his shillelagh, conks the old gent, does a broken-toe dance, then exits blithely singing *Armfuls of Purple!*"

Fordney chuckled as he regarded a dripping sky roofing a soggy world. Examining the muddy ladder he murmured, "Quite . . ."

"Quite what!" bellowed Kelley.

"Why, it's quite evident how those footprints in the murder room were made," answered Fordney. "A few simple deductions give us one negative and two positive clues concerning the killer's dress. You see, Jim, he must have been wearing . . ."

What deductions did Professor Fordney make from the footprints that enabled him to describe three points of the killer's dress? Solution below.

From the faint, incomplete shoeless right-foot impressions in the murder room, the Professor deduced that they were made by a man wearing cheap blue socks, the right one sufficiently wet for the cheap dye to run. Since the blue was deeper in the center, he reasoned that the man had a hole in his right shoe which accounted for the wetness of the right sock. Since there were no impressions of a left foot, Fordney deduced that the left sock had not become wet, therefore, that there was no hole in the left shoe. Although he could not definitely determine the sex of the tiptoeing murderer from the incomplete footprints, he was reasonably sure the killer was a man, both from the nature of the crime and the fact that women's blue hose are not common.

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FOR VALUE RECEIVED

by RICHARD DEMING

"THE ODDEST THING HAPPENED THIS morning," Chalmers said. "I can't make up my mind whether to take it to the police or forget about it. I'd really have nothing but suspicion to report in any event, and probably would only get a horse laugh for my pains."

I was a little surprised at his obviously upset manner, for even under stress Lloyd Chalmers ordinarily exhibits the ponderous kind of aplomb you might expect of a man who has practiced criminal law for two decades.

"I did go so far as phoning a ballistics expert I know over at Columbia University, though," Chalmers said. "He told me it would be quite possible to fire a rifle like an artillery piece with considerable accuracy up to a range of several miles, providing you used a fixed mount, were good at mathematics, and had an observer to adjust your fire."

Rising to mix fresh drinks, I said, "If you'll pardon the comment, you're dithering. I haven't the foggiest notion what you're talking about."

"About the death of Thomas Mathewson III a few weeks back," Chalmers said testily. "You must have seen it in the papers. He was struck by a spent rifle bullet while seated in a duck blind in the center of a small lake up in the Catskills. The coroner called it accidental death from a stray bullet fired by some unknown hunter, but it occurred to me that the lake would have made artillery observation easy. The blind was a sunken barrel camouflaged by weeds, you see, and was surrounded by water for a hundred yards in all directions. An observer could have adjusted fire by the splashes."

Handing him a new drink, I reseated myself by the fire and leaned back in my chair.

"Thomas Mathewson III," I repeated thoughtfully. "The multi-wived playboy who spent so much of his time in jams, wasn't he? I vaguely recall reading something about his death. Was he a client of yours?"

"One of my better ones from the standpoint of fees," Chalmers said glumly, "but absolutely the worst from the standpoint of my ulcers."

"You think he may have been murdered?"

"See what you think after I tell you what came in the mail this morning." He paused to eye his drink thoughtfully. "But it wouldn't make sense to you without knowing the background. Let me organize my thoughts a moment and I'll tell you the whole story . . ."

Thomas Mathewson III (Chalmers said) was the most horrible example I have ever encountered of what too

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much inherited money can do to an individual. It was not just that he lived a life of idleness and squandered too much, for compared to the average so-called playboy he was rather niggardly with his money . . . no, niggardly isn't the right word either, for on occasion he made gestures which by popular standards could only be regarded as generous. But always with what to him was a logical motive. He possessed a sort of calculated shrewdness which, from his own perverted standpoint, got him what he considered value received.

His eight wives, for example, cost him in excess of a million before he was through with the last of them. A normal person might regard this as an expensive proposition, but Tom Mathewson considered it a good buy. At the time of the last settlement he told me quite candidly each of his wives had cost him about what he had estimated in advance of proposing marriage — the implication being, of course, that he had bought the women like so many cattle and was well satisfied with his bargains.

He firmly believed that money could buy anything, and insofar as he was concerned, apparently it could. It certainly managed to get him out of many a jam which would have landed a poorer man in jail.

But before you anticipate me by assuming I am working up to the old moral wheeze that gold is not all, that Tom Mathewson finally discovered money could not buy the one thing he wanted most, let me assure you I have no such intention. So far as I know, he went to his death never having failed to get exactly what he wanted, and at what he considered a fair price.

What I suspect upended his apple cart was another person adopting his same philosophy.

The circumstances leading up to the incident which upset me this morning go back to early 1945. We were still at war then, and the gasoline and tire shortages kept most people at home. But for Mathewson the war never existed. He somehow managed to escape the draft in spite of being only thirty-five, unmarried at the time, and in perfect physical condition. The dash compartment of his long-nosed convertible was always full of gasoline coupons which he obtained the Lord only knows where, and whenever he felt the urge to take a trip, he simply went.

This particular morning he had driven up from New York with the intention of spending the weekend at the hunting lodge he owned a few miles the other side of Catskill — the same place, incidentally, where he was killed last month. He had with him the blonde young lady who later became his seventh wife.

He was about half-drunk as usual, and he roared onto the Rip Van Winkle Bridge at a speed witnesses later estimated at eight-five miles an hour. Unfortunately, a six-year-old boy on a bicycle was crossing the bridge from the other direction.

When I got down to Catskill in

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response to Tom's urgent phone call from the jail, I found the local authorities determined to send him up for life, providing they could deter the townspeople from taking the law into their own hands.

The dead boy was from a farm just outside of Catskill and about five miles from Tom's own place. And of all the children around the village of Catskill whom he could have picked to kill, he had the bad luck to run down the only son of the town's outstanding hero. Staff Sergeant Jud Peters, the boy's father, was a battalion communications sergeant with the field artillery supporting General Patton, and only the day before, Catskill had received news of his winning the Distinguished Service Cross.

It was undoubtedly the worst jam I ever had to get him out of. And the worst of it was, his money was a disadvantage in this case — at least, in the beginning. In the end, as usual, it was money that saved his hide.

His tremendous wealth was held against him by the natives, who were in no mood to tolerate special prerogatives for the rich. Had he been penniless, I doubt that public reaction would have been nearly so strong. But his reputation for profligate spending, combined with the suspicion that he was a draft dodger, set them after his blood.

His first thought was to start greasing palms, but fortunately he always waited for my advice before making any move at all when he was in a jam. Not that he always followed my advice; to some extent it depended on whether my arguments were based on moral or practical grounds. Frequently they were the former, for he was constantly ready to bribe anyone who could render him service, and professional ethics demanded I do everything possible to dissuade him from this amoral practice. If the best I could do was read him a moral lecture, he blithely went ahead with his corruption, though he always made a pretense of following my advice and did everything possible to conceal his bribe-giving from me. This, I am convinced, was solely to avoid hearing further moral lectures, and not because he cared a mil for my opinion of him.

But he had considerable respect for my practical judgment, and if I were able to advance any objection to bribery other than an ethical one, he usually complied without question.

I remember him as he looked that day: still firm-bodied in spite of his excessive drinking, for he had professional masseurs work him over daily; entirely at ease and his expression indicating his sole emotion was irritation that the dead child had interrupted his hunting trip.

The first thing he said to me was, "Think it would speed things up if I slipped the Chief a couple of thousand to spread in the proper places?"

Having already talked to the Catskill Chief of Police and noted his grim expression, I knew any mention

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of money would be the worst tactical error Tom could make.

I said bluntly, "If you offer anyone in this town so much as a dime, I suspect the Chief will order you hanged without trial."

His shoulders moved in a graceful shrug. "Then I guess it's your baby, Counselor. Just get me out of this town fast."

But for once there was no fast way to get what he wanted. Nor was there any possibility either of hushing the matter up or avoiding trial. So I threw the local authorities off balance by attempting to do neither.

On a writ of habeas corpus I got Mathewson before a J.P. who set bond with the provision the defendant remain in the county. That got him out of jail, but he still couldn't leave Catskill. Then I quietly pulled a few strings to get the case moved up on the Grand Jury's calendar, and as soon as he was properly indicted, I played my trump. I asked for change of venue on the grounds that public opinion prohibited a fair trial in the county where the offense took place, and since the plea was obviously truthful, I got the case transferred to a neutral county without difficulty.

Then I stalled for a year by getting a series of continuances, and when everyone but the people of Catskill had entirely forgotten the matter, finally let him come to trial. The charges were reckless driving, driving while intoxicated, and manslaughter.

Since it was Tom's third arrest for drunken driving and the second person he had killed, naturally he was found guilty. Clarence Darrow could have hoped for no other verdict. But he was found guilty with a recommendation of leniency, which I consider a courtroom triumph. All he suffered was a $500 fine, a suspended sentence, and loss of his driver's license for a year — a mild sentence when you consider his previous record.

In the meantime I had managed an out-of-court settlement with the child's parents — or rather with his mother, for Sergeant Jud Peters was still overseas. She was a pathetic little woman in her late twenties, so crushed by the loss of her son that she hardly knew what she was doing and automatically signed anything her Catskill lawyer told her to sign. The latter, not being the sharpest legal opponent I had ever encountered, would have settled the matter for as little as $10,000, but Mathewson arbitrarily set $50,000 as the amount which would salve his conscience, and insisted that I offer that amount. Naturally Mrs. Peters' lawyer told her to sign.

The total cost to Mathewson was terrific, for in addition to substantial legal fees over a period of a year, I am almost certain it involved a large bribe, or possibly bribes. Whether he managed to buy one of the jury, or made a secret campaign contribution to the judge who later pronounced the lenient sentence, or both, I don't know. I am only guessing, for I would have countenanced no such action on

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the part of my client had I been able to find concrete proof of it; but it is a partly substantiated guess. Not only was it entirely in keeping with Mathewson's normal procedure, but since I handled all his financial matters, I was aware he had withdrawn a huge sum from his main bank account. And when he refused to explain the withdrawal, I simply added two and two.

A thinner-skinned person than Tom Mathewson would have disposed of the hunting lodge and never again gone near Catskill, for his squeezing out of the jam with a suspended sentence left him universally hated by the natives. But he seemed to feel that the financial cost to him had balanced his responsibility for the child's death, and he resumed use of the lodge with an entirely clear conscience.

I believe he was a trifle uneasy for a few days when Staff Sergeant Jud Peters finally returned home, but his uneasiness stemmed solely from fear that the bereaved father might create an embarrassing public scene the first time they met, and not because he felt any further responsibility to the man. He was not without animal courage, however, and made no attempt to avoid contact with Jud Peters, a feat which would have been difficult anyway, since Peters's farm was only five miles from Tom's lodge. In that country five miles makes you neighbors.

I vaguely recall him mentioning the first time they finally met, a casual encounter in one of Catskill's taverns. I remember there was a note of relief in Tom's voice when he described the meeting, for apparently the young father harbored no active resentment. I gathered he had been cool to Tom, but not uncivil, and left Tom with the impression that his sole wish was to forget everything connected with his son's death.

I myself had entirely forgotten the Peters affair, for in the six years since the accident Tom had been in many intervening scrapes requiring my attention. I was only reminded of it when I had to make an unexpected trip to Catskill.

It came about when Mathewson phoned me from the hunting lodge and asked me up for a weekend. I would not have gone had it been only a social invitation, for I must confess I detested the man even though he was one of my best clients. But he wanted to see me on a legal matter — not a jam this time, something concerning the transfer of certain securities he owned.

Catskill, as you may know, is not on the New York Central line — you have to change to a bus at Hudson. Since the trip by car from Mathewson's lodge to Hudson takes only a quarter-hour more than a trip to Catskill, you would think my host would have met me at Hudson. But Thomas Mathewson III could never be described as a considerate host. He paid well for my services and felt he owed me nothing beyond that payment.

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Consequently, my instructions were to meet him in the bar of a small hotel near the Catskill bus depot. And as was his habit in keeping appointments, he was about fifteen minutes late. I had a beer while I waited.

I was sipping my beer and recalling without pleasure the sole previous occasion I had visited Catskill when the bartender broke in on my thoughts.

"Ain't you the lawyer who was down here from New York a few years back about the Peters boy?" he inquired.

Startled, I glanced up and admitted I was.

"Pretty slick way he got out of that," the bartender commented. "Mathewson, I mean."

"He didn't exactly 'get out of it,' as you put it," I said coldly. "He was convicted of manslaughter."

"Yeah. On paper. Never served a day, did he? Not that I care, Mister. I was brand-new here when it happened and didn't know any of the parties concerned. Still don't, for that matter."

Then occurred one of those odd coincidences which make life so unpredictable. The only other occupant of the bar at the moment, a man of about thirty-five clad in quarter-boots and a hunting jacket, turned an intelligent but moody face in our direction.

He said, "Just happens I'm Jud Peters, if that means anything to you."

The bartender was as startled as I was, and immediately withdrew from the conversation to start polishing glasses. But after my first surprise, I examined the man with friendly curiosity. His tone had been neither bitter nor belligerent. On the contrary, it had seemed faintly apologetic, as though he disclosed his identity merely to prevent the bartender and myself from creating an embarrassing situation.

Moving along the bar toward him, I offered my hand and introduced myself.

"I needn't tell you how much I sympathized with your loss at the time, and still do, Mr. Peters," I said. "It was a terrible tragedy, and Mr. Mathewson did everything in his legal power to atone for it."

"He did?" he asked in a mildly surprised tone. "Oh, you mean the money."

"Naturally no amount of money could make up for the loss of your son," I said. "But in fairness to my client you should know I advised him that a settlement of $10,000 would probably be accepted by your wife, and Mr. Mathewson insisted on offering $50,000."

He looked at me curiously for a long time, then finally said in a puzzled voice, "I didn't know that. He was exceedingly generous, wasn't he?"

"Well, he recognized his responsibility. There was no question about the accident being his fault, and I suppose he realized the only way he

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could begin to make restitution was with money. Some hard things have been said about Mr. Mathewson, but he does have the virtue of being scrupulously fair in money matters."

A voice behind me said, "Who's been saying hard things about me, Counselor?" and I turned to find Tom had come in unnoticed by either of us.

While his tone was bantering, there was a barely concealed edge to it, and I could tell he was not happy to find me talking to Jud Peters about him.

Tom Mathewson had changed physically in the six years since the accident. He was now just past forty, and masseurs were no longer able to erase the effects of long dissipation. While still appearing in good physical shape, a weal of fat incased his middle, his jowls were beginning to sag, and a sun-lamp tan could not entirely hide the tiny criss-cross of veins gradually forming in his cheeks.

With the physical change he had undergone a psychological change too, becoming even more overbearing in manner and even more prone to treat those he engaged professionally like servants. He was examining me now with an expression which would have been appropriate had he discovered his valet stealing scotch from his cellar.

Since his expression irked me, I said, "Who hasn't said hard things about you, Tom? But as a matter of fact we were saying nice things for a change. Until now, Mr. Peters here was unaware that the size of the settlement for his boy was your own idea, and otherwise might have been only a fraction of the actual amount."

Tom's eyebrows raised. "Fifty thousand, as I remember," he said indifferently. "But I believe I once mentioned that Mr. Peters prefers to forget the whole matter. I see no reason to rehash it."

"It came up kind of accidentally from a remark the bartender made," Jud Peters said, and again his voice impressed me as being almost apologetic. "And the remark you overheard Mr. Chalmers make was prompted by my comment that you were very generous."

"Thanks aren't necessary," Tom said shortly. "Come on, Counselor. I left my motor running."

"Oh, I wasn't thanking you," Jud Peters said. "I imagine you could afford it."

Tom had started for the door, but now he stopped and turned around slowly. "No one can really 'afford' that kind of accident, Mr. Peters. I've had that same remark addressed to me on a number of occasions, particularly by my ex-wives. And, as usual, the implication is that a man with money is fair game. For your information that $50,000 settlement was a small part of the total cost of that accident. When lawyer Chalmers here and a few others were through with me, I had spent exactly 5 per cent of my total assets. That's one-twentieth of an estate intended by my father to provide reasonable comfort for a lifetime. One-twentieth,

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Mr. Peters, for an incident which lasted approximately three seconds."

The man's tone was so frosty that both Peters and I stared at him in amazement. Peters's face perceptibly reddened and there was a moment of embarrassed silence.

Then Jud Peters asked in a soft voice, "You think one-twentieth of your fortune was a fair purchase price for my son, Mr. Mathewson?"

Tom blinked at him, opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finally he said, "You've twisted my meaning, Peters. Let's drop the subject."

But Jud Peters was staring at Mathewson in an entirely new way, as though he had just at that moment begun to understand the man. And his expression told me he realized, as I suddenly realized also, that he had not twisted Mathewson's meaning. A fair purchase price was exactly the way Tom Mathewson looked at it, and he felt that he and Jud Peters were quits.

As though terminating an interview, Peters turned to the bartender and said quietly, "I'll have another beer, please."

The rest of that weekend was singularly uneventful. By late Saturday afternoon we had finished the legal matter which was the basis for my invitation and were free to enjoy what entertainments were available.

I never quite understood what fascination hunting held for Tom Mathewson, for he was not what you would call an "outdoor man." I suspect there was a streak of sadism in him, and he took his pleasure more from killing than from enjoyment of the sport. But whatever the attraction, during duck season it was hard to get him out of the sunken-barrel duck blind in the center of his lake. He would have his combination caretaker-and-handyman row him out to the blind, leave him, and return to shore, where the handyman would conceal himself in the weeds with a retriever, within shouting distance of Tom.

There was not room in the blind for two, even had I cared to shoot duck, and in his typically considerate manner Tom simply left me to shift for myself.

The young lady he was contemplating making his ninth wife was staying at the lodge, but while she was beautiful, I did not find her conversation stimulating. She spent most of her time in the cocktail lounge, playing innumerable records on the radio-phonograph and sipping drinks prepared by Tom's valet, who donned a white coat and dubbed as bartender when required.

By Sunday afternoon I was so desperately bored that I decided to take a hike.

I did not realize the farmhouse where I stopped for a drink of water was the Peters place until I saw Jud Peters through a basement window. The lane approached the house from one side, and I was just stepping onto the gravel walk which led alongside the house when I glanced at an open basement window at the corner and

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received the shocking impression I was going to be shot by a rifle.

After my initial leap of panic I saw that the rifle was clamped in a workbench vise, and merely happened to be pointing upward directly at me. Jud Peters seemed to be doing something to the stock.

He looked up in time to see my startled expression, and grinned. "Afternoon, Mr. Chalmers. I'm not aiming this at you. You're aiming yourself at it."

And twisting the handle of the vise, he released the rifle and stood the weapon out of sight.

"Be right out," he told me.

And that's all there really is to the background. I got my drink of water, had a few minutes chat with Jud Peters, and went on my way. That evening I returned to New York, and two days later Tom Mathewson was struck by a spent bullet while seated in his duck blind. There seemed to be no question in the coroner's mind about it being an accident, since from the angle of impact and the depth of penetration, it was possible to deduce that the bullet had come from a hunting rifle several miles away.

When Chalmers stopped, I said, "How do you make a murder out of all that?"

"I didn't until this morning," he said. "But now it occurs to me Jud Peters was not only an artilleryman, but a communications sergeant. About a hundred yards from Tom's private lake is a densely-wooded knoll, and on top of it I recall spotting a telephone pole. Now this is all assumption, you understand, but suppose that pole was the one that supported the telephone wires going to Jud Peters's place, and suppose Jud cut in a phone to connect that knoll to his phone at home? Certainly if he had an old hand-set around, a communications sergeant could rig up a simple system like that. An observer — say, his wife — could stand on the knoll, completely hidden by foliage, and report how many yards over, short, or to one side the splashes were each time Jud fired the rifle — the rifle I saw clamped in his vise and aimed in the direction of Mathewson's lake."

I could not help grinning. "No wonder you hesitated about going to the police. On that mass of assumptions, and entirely lacking evidence, you couldn't even get them to listen to you. What put such a fantastic idea in your head?"

"This morning's mail," Chalmers said. "First, there was a letter from a Catskill accounting firm enclosing an audit of Jud Peters's total resources. Including an estimated value on the farm, it came to exactly $63,000. In a separate envelope there was a check from Jud Peters for $3150, made out to the estate of Thomas Mathewson III."

I looked blank. "For what?"

"It was marked, *For value received.* Take one-twentieth of $63,000 and see what you get."

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The extent and versatility of Mark Twain's writings in the detective-crime field are almost wholly unappreciated, not only by general readers but by critics. Mark Twain was the first writer in history to see the plot possibilities of fingerprints, both in the short story and in the novel. In Chapter XXXI *of* LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI *(1883), which is a complete short story by itself, and in his novel,* THE TRAGEDY OF PUDD'NHEAD WILSON *(1894), Mark Twain inaugurated the literary use of fingerprints as a means of criminal identification. His other contributions to the genre include: "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," a swindling story, and one of the earliest; "A Medieval Romance," a riddle story;* THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER *and* THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, *both containing noble passages of crime and detection; "The Stolen White Elephant," a detective story, and one of the funniest ever written;* A DOUBLE-BARRELLED DETECTIVE STORY, *with no less a detective than Sherlock Holmes himself; "A Murder, a Mystery, and a Marriage," in which Mark Twain ran the gamut of crime, mystery, and detection; and* JIM WHEELER, DETECTIVE, *a novel which Mark Twain never finished.*

And that isn't all. The other day we picked up a copy of TOM SAWYER, ABROAD, *and began reading it. Now, it must be at least thirty years since we've dipped into that book, which contains the novelette, "Tom Sawyer, Detective." And as we read "Tom Sawyer, Detective," we realized that we didn't remember a blessed thing about the plot. It was all brand-new to us, and we hadn't the slightest idea of what was coming next. So, on the theory that our memory is no better, or worse, than yours, we decided to bring you a story which — although you may have read it a generation ago — will probably be as fresh as paint to you today.*

TOM SAWYER, DETECTIVE: *Part One*

by MARK TWAIN

WELL, IT WAS THE NEXT SPRING after me and Tom Sawyer set old Jim free, the time he was chained up for a runaway slave down there on Tom's uncle Silas's farm in Arkansaw. The frost was working out of the ground, and out of the air, too, and it was getting closer and closer onto barefoot time every day; and next it would be marble-time, and next mumblety-peg, and next tops and hoops, and next kites, and then right away it would be summer and going in a-swimming. It just makes a

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boy homesick to look ahead like that and see how far off summer is. Yes, and it sets him to sighing and saddening around, and there's something the matter with him, he don't know what. But, anyway, he gets out by himself and mopes and thinks; and mostly he hunts for a lonesome place high up on the hill in the edge of the woods, and sets there and looks away off on the big Mississippi down there a-reaching miles and miles around the points where the timber looks smoky and dim, it's so far off and still, and everything's so solemn it seems like everybody you've loved is dead and gone, and you 'most wish you was dead and gone too, and done with it all.

Don't you know what that is? It's spring fever. That is what the name of it is. And when you've got it, you want — oh, you don't quite know what it is you *do* want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so! It seems to you that mainly what you want is to get away; get away from the same old tedious things you're so used to seeing and so tired of, and see something new. That is the idea; you want to go and be a wanderer; you want to go wandering far away to strange countries where everything is mysterious and wonderful and romantic. And if you can't do that, you'll put up with considerable less; you'll go anywhere you *can* go, just so as to get away, and be thankful of the chance, too.

Well, me and Tom Sawyer had the spring fever, and had it bad, too; but it warn't any use to think about Tom trying to get away, because, as he said, his aunt Polly wouldn't let him quit school and go traipsing off somers wasting time; so we was pretty blue. We was setting on the front steps one day about sundown talking this way, when out comes his aunt Polly with a letter in her hand and says:

"Tom, I reckon you've got to pack up and go down to Arkansaw — your aunt Sally wants you."

I 'most jumped out of my skin for joy. I reckoned Tom would fly at his aunt and hug her head off; but if you believe me he set there like a rock, and never said a word. It made me fit to cry to see him act so foolish, with such a noble chance as this opening up. Why, we might lose it if he didn't speak up and show he was thankful and grateful. But he set there and studied and studied till I was that distressed I didn't know what to do; then he says, very ca'm, and I could 'a' shot him for it:

"Well," he says, "I'm right down sorry, Aunt Polly, but I reckon I got to be excused — for the present."

His aunt Polly was knocked so stupid and so mad at the cold impudence of it that she couldn't say a word for as much as a half a minute, and this gave me a chance to nudge Tom and whisper:

"'Ain't you got any sense? Sp'iling such a noble chance as this and throwing it away?"

But he warn't disturbed. He mumbled back:

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"Huck Finn, do you want me to let her *see* how bad I want to go? Why, she'd begin to doubt, right away, and imagine a lot of sicknesses and dangers and objections, and first you know she'd take it all back. You lemme alone; I reckon I know how to work her."

Now I never would 'a' thought of that. But he was right. Tom Sawyer was always right — the levelest head I ever see, and always *at* himself and ready for anything you might spring on him. By this time his aunt Polly was all straight again, and she let fly. She says:

"You'll be excused! *You* will! Well, I never heard the like of it in all my days! The idea of you talking like that to *me!* Now take yourself off and pack your traps; and if I hear another word out of you about what you'll be excused from and what you won't, I lay *I'll* excuse you — with a hickory!"

She hit his head a thump with her thimble as we dodged by, and he let on to be whimpering as we struck for the stairs. Up in his room he hugged me, he was so out of his head for gladness because he was going traveling. And he says:

"Before we get away she'll wish she hadn't let me go, but she won't know any way to get around it now. After what she's said, her pride won't let her take it back."

Tom was packed in ten minutes, all except what his aunt and Mary would finish up for him; then we waited ten more for her to get cooled down and sweet and gentle again; for Tom said it took her ten minutes to unruffle in times when half of her feathers was up, but twenty when they was all up, and this was one of the times when they was all up. Then we went down, being in a sweat to know what the letter said.

She was setting there in a brown study, with it laying in her lap. We set down, and she says:

"They're in considerable trouble down there, and they think you and Huck'll be a kind of diversion for them — 'comfort,' they say. Much of that they'll get out of you and Huck Finn, I reckon. There's a neighbor named Brace Dunlap that's been wanting to marry their Benny for three months, and at last they told him p'int blank and once for all, he *couldn't;* so he has soured on them, and they're worried about it. I reckon he's somebody they think they better be on the good side of, for they've tried to please him by hiring his no-account brother to help on the farm when they can't hardly afford it, and don't want him around anyhow. Who are the Dunlaps?"

"They live about a mile from Uncle Silas's place, Aunt Polly — all the farmers live about a mile apart down there — and Brace Dunlap is a long sight richer than any of the others. He's a widower, thirty-six years old, without any children, and is proud of his money and overbearing, and everybody is a little afraid of him. I judge he thought he could have any girl he wanted, just for the asking,

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and it must have set him back a good deal when he found he couldn't get Benny. Why, Benny's only half as old as he is, and just as sweet and lovely as — well, you've seen her. Poor old Uncle Silas — why, it's pitiful, him trying to curry favor that way — so hard pushed and poor, and yet hiring that useless Jubiter Dunlap to please his ornery brother."

"What a name — Jubiter! Where'd he get it?"

"It's only just a nickname. I reckon they've forgot his real name long before this. He's twenty-seven, now, and has had it ever since the first time he ever went in swimming. The school-teacher seen a round brown mole the size of a dime on his left leg above his knee, and four little bits of moles around it, when he was naked, and he said it 'minded him of Jubiter and his moons; and the children thought it was funny, and so they got to calling him Jubiter, and he's Jubiter yet. He's tall, and lazy, and sly, and sneaky, and ruther cowardly, too, but kind of good-natured, and wears long brown hair and no beard, and hasn't got a cent, and Brace boards him for nothing, and gives him his old clothes to wear, and despises him. Jubiter is a twin."

"What's t'other twin like?"

"Just exactly like Jubiter — so they say; used to was, anyway, but he hain't been seen for seven years. He got to robbing when he was nineteen or twenty, and they jailed him; but he broke jail and got away — up North here, somers. They used to hear about him robbing and burglaring now and then, but that was years ago. He's dead now. At least that's what they say. They don't hear about him any more."

"What was his name?"

"Jake."

There wasn't anything more said for a considerable while; the old lady was thinking. At last she says:

"The thing that is mostly worrying your aunt Sally is the tempers that that man Jubiter gets your uncle into."

Tom was astonished, and so was I. Tom says:

"Tempers? Uncle Silas? Land, you must be joking! I didn't know he *had* any temper."

"Works him up into perfect rages, your aunt Sally says; says he acts as if he would really hit the man, sometimes."

"Aunt Polly, it beats anything I ever heard of. Why, he's just as gentle as mush."

"Well, she's worried, anyway. Says your uncle Silas is like a changed man, on account of all this quarreling. And the neighbors talk about it, and lay all the blame on your uncle, of course, because he's a preacher and hain't got any business to quarrel. Your aunt Sally says he hates to go into the pulpit, he's so ashamed; and the people have begun to cool toward him, and he ain't as popular now as he used to was."

"Well, ain't it strange? Why, Aunt Polly, he was always so good and kind and moony and absent-minded and

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chuckle-headed and lovable — why, he was just an angel! What *can* be the matter of him, do you reckon?"

We had powerful good luck; because we got a chance in a stern-wheeler from away North which was bound for one of them bayous or one-horse rivers away down Louisiana way, and so we could go all the way down the Upper Mississippi and all the way down the Lower Mississippi to that farm in Arkansaw without having to change steamboats at St. Louis; not so very much short of a thousand miles at one pull.

A pretty lonesome boat; there warn't but few passengers, and all old folks, that set around, wide apart, dozing, and was very quiet. We was four days getting out of the "upper river," because we got aground so much. But it warn't dull — couldn't be for boys that was traveling.

From the very start me and Tom allowed that there was somebody sick in the stateroom next to ourn, because the meals was always toted in there by the waiters. By and by we asked about it — Tom did — and the waiter said it was a man, but he didn't look sick.

"Well, but *ain't* he sick?"

"I don't know; maybe he is, but 'pears to me he's just letting on."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because if he was sick he would pull his clothes off *some* time or other —don't you reckon he would? Well, this one don't. At least he don't ever pull off his boots, anyway."

"The mischief he don't! Not even when he goes to bed?"

"No."

It was always nuts for Tom Sawyer — a mystery was. If you'd lay out a mystery and a pie before me and him, you wouldn't have to say take your choice; it was a thing that would regulate itself. Because in my nature I have always run to pie, whilst in his nature he has always run to mystery. People are made different. And it is the best way. Tom says to the waiter:

"What's the man's name?"

"Phillips."

"Where'd he come aboard?"

"I think he got aboard at Elexandria, up on the Iowa line."

"What do you reckon he's a-playing?"

"I hain't any notion — I never thought of it."

"Anything peculiar about him? — the way he acts or talks?"

"No — nothing, except he seems so scary, and keeps his doors locked night and day both, and when you knock he won't let you in till he opens the door a crack and sees who it is."

"By jiminy, it's int'resting! I'd like to get a look at him. Say — the next time you're going in there, don't you reckon you could spread the door and —"

"No, indeedy! He's always behind it. He would block that game."

Tom studied over it, and then he says:

"Looky here. You lend me your apern and let me take him his break-

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fast in the morning. I'll give you a quarter."

The boy was plenty willing enough, if the head steward wouldn't mind. Tom says that's all right, he reckoned he could fix it with the head steward; and he done it. He fixed it so as we could both go in with aperns on.

He didn't sleep much, he was in such a sweat to get in there and find out the mystery about Phillips; and moreover he done a lot of guessing about it all night, which warn't no use, for if you are going to find out the facts of a thing, what's the sense in guessing out what ain't the facts and wasting ammunition? I didn't lose no sleep. I wouldn't give a dern to know what's the matter with Phillips, I says to myself.

Well, in the morning we put on the aperns and got a couple of trays of truck, and Tom he knocked on the door. The man opened it a crack, and then he let us in and shut it quick. By Jackson, when we got a sight of him, we 'most dropped the trays! And Tom says:

"Why, Jubiter Dunlap, where'd *you* come from?"

Well, the man was astonished, of course; and first off he looked like he didn't know whether to be scared, or glad, or both, or which, but finally he settled down to being glad; and then his color come back, and he says:

"But I ain't Jubiter Dunlap. I'd just as soon tell you who I am, though, if you'll swear to keep mum, for I ain't no Phillips, either."

Tom says: "We'll keep mum, but there ain't any need to tell who you are if you ain't Jubiter Dunlap."

"Why?"

"Because if you ain't him you're t'other twin, Jake. You're the spit'n image of Jubiter."

"Well, I *am* Jake. But looky here, how do you come to know?"

Tom told about the adventures we'd had down there at his uncle Silas's last summer, and when he see that there warn't anything about his folks — or him either, for that matter — that we didn't know, he opened out and talked perfectly free and candid. He never made any bones about his own case; said he'd been a hard lot, was a hard lot yet, and reckoned he'd *be* a hard lot plumb to the end. He said of course it was a dangerous life, and —

He give a kind of gasp, and set his head like a person that's listening. We didn't say anything, and so it was very still for a second or so.

Then we got him comfortable again, telling him about his people, and how Brace's wife had been dead three years, and Brace wanted to marry Benny and she shook him, and Jubiter was working for Uncle Silas, and him and Uncle Silas quarreling all the time — and then he let go and laughed.

"Land!" he says, "it's like old times to hear all this tittle-tattle, and does me good. It's been seven years and more since I heard any. How do they talk about me these days?"

"Why, they don't talk about you at all — at least only just a mention."

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"The nation!" he says, surprised; "why is that?"

"Because they think you are dead long ago."

"No! Are you speaking true? — honor bright, now." He jumped up.

"Honor bright. There ain't anybody thinks you are alive."

"Then I'm saved, I'm saved, sure! I'll go home. They'll hide me and save my life. You keep mum. Swear you'll never tell on me. Oh, boys, be good to a poor devil that's being hunted day and night, and dasn't show his face! I've never done you any harm; I'll never do you any, as God is in the heavens; swear you'll be good to me and help me save my life."

We'd 'a' swore it if he'd been a dog; and so we done it. Well, he couldn't love us enough for it or be grateful enough, poor cuss.

We talked along, and he got out a little handbag and begun to open it, and told us to turn our backs. We done it, and when he told us to turn again he was perfectly different to what he was before. He had on blue goggles and the naturalest-looking long brown whiskers and mustashes you ever see. His own mother wouldn't 'a' knowed him. He asked us if he looked like his brother Jubiter, now.

"No," Tom said; "there ain't anything left that's like him except the long hair."

"All right, I'll get that cropped close to my head before I get there; then him and Brace will keep my secret, and I'll live with them as being a stranger, and the neighbors won't ever guess me out. What do you think?"

Tom he studied a while, then he says:

"Well, of course me and Huck are going to keep mum there, but if you don't keep mum yourself there's going to be a little bit of a risk — it ain't much, maybe, but it's a little. I mean, if you talk, won't people notice that your voice is just like Jubiter's; and mightn't it make them think of the twin they reckoned was dead, but maybe after all was hid all this time under another name?"

"By George," he says, "you're a sharp one! You're perfectly right. I've got to play deef and dumb when there's a neighbor around. If I'd 'a' struck for home and forgot that little detail — However, I wasn't striking for home. I was breaking for any place where I could get away from these fellows that are after me; then I was going to put on this disguise and get some different clothes, and —"

He jumped for the outside door and laid his ear against it and listened, pale and panting. Presently he whispers:

"Sounded like cocking a gun! Lord, what a life to lead!"

Then he sunk down in a chair all limp and sick-like.

From that time out, we was with him 'most all the time, and one or t'other of us slept in his upper berth. He said he had been so lonesome, and it was such a comfort to him to have company. We was in a sweat to find out what his secret was, but Tom said

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the best way was not to seem anxious, then likely he would drop into it himself in one of his talks, but if we got to asking questions he would get suspicious and shet up his shell. It turned out just so. It warn't no trouble to see that he *wanted* to talk about it, but always along at first he would scare away from it when he got on the very edge of it, and go to talking about something else. The way it come about was this: He got to asking us, kind of indifferent like, about the passengers down on deck. We told him about them. But he warn't satisfied; we warn't particular enough. He told us to describe them better. Tom done it. At last, when Tom was describing one of the roughest and raggedest ones, he gave a shiver and a gasp and says:

"Oh, lordy, that's one of them! They're aboard sure —"

Presently when Tom was describing another mangy, rough deck-passenger, he give that shiver again and said:

"That's him! — that's the other one. If it would only come a good black stormy night and I could get ashore. You see, they've got spies on me. They've got a right to come up and buy drinks at the bar yonder forrard, and they take that chance to bribe somebody to keep watch on me — porter or boots or somebody. If I was to slip ashore without anybody seeing me, they would know it inside of an hour."

So then he got to wandering along, and pretty soon, sure enough, he was telling!

"It was a confidence game. We played it on a julery-shop in St. Louis. What we was after was a couple of noble big di'monds as big as hazelnuts, which everybody was running to see. We was dressed up fine, and we played it on them in broad daylight. We ordered the di'monds sent to the hotel for us to see if we wanted to buy, and when we was examining them we had paste counterfeits all ready, and *them* was the things that went back to the shop when we said the water wasn't quite fine enough for twelve thousand dollars."

"Twelve—thousand—dollars!" Tom says. "Was they worth all that?"

"Every cent of it."

"And you fellows got away with them?"

"As easy as nothing. I don't reckon the julery people know they've been robbed yet. But it wouldn't be good sense to stay around St. Louis, of course, so we considered where we'd go. One was for going one way, one another, so we throwed up, heads or tails, and the Upper Mississippi won. We done up the di'monds in a paper and put our names on it and put it in the keep of the hotel clerk, and told him not to ever let either of us have it again without the others was on hand to see it done; then we went downtown, each by his own self — because I reckon maybe we all had the same notion."

"What notion?" Tom says.

"To rob the others."

"What — one take everything, after all of you had helped to get it?"

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"Cert'nly."

It disgusted Tom Sawyer, and he said it was the orneriest, low-downest thing he ever heard of. But Jake Dunlap said it warn't unusual in the profession.

"You see, the trouble was, you couldn't divide up two di'monds amongst three. If there'd been three — But never mind about that, there *warn't* three. I loafed along the back streets studying and studying. And I says to myself, I'll hog them di'monds the first chance I get, and I'll have a disguise all ready, and I'll give the boys the slip, and when I'm safe away I'll put it on, and then let them find me if they can. So I got the false whiskers and the goggles and this countrified suit of clothes, and fetched them along back in a handbag; and when I was passing a shop where they sell all sorts of things, I got a glimpse of one of my pals through the window. It was Bud Dixon. I was glad, you bet. I says to myself, I'll see what he buys. So I kept shady, and watched. Now what do you reckon he bought?"

"Whiskers?" said I.

"No."

"Goggles?"

"No."

"Oh, keep still, Huck Finn, can't you, you're only just hendering all you can. What *was* it, Jake?"

"You'd never guess in the world. It was only just a screwdriver — just a wee little bit of a screwdriver."

"Well, I declare! What did he want with that?"

"That's what *I* thought. It was curious. It clean stumped me. I says to myself, what can he want with that thing? Well, when he come out I tracked him to a second-hand slop-shop and see him buy a red flannel shirt and some old ragged clothes — just the ones he's got on now, as you've described. Then I went down to the wharf and hid my things aboard the up-river boat that we had picked out, and then started back and had another streak of luck. I seen our other pal lay in *his* stock of old rusty second-handers. We got the di'monds and went aboard the boat.

"But now we was up a stump, for we couldn't go to bed. We had to set up and watch one another. Pity, that was; pity to put that kind of a strain on us, because there was bad blood between us from a couple of weeks back, and we was only friends in the way of business. Bad anyway, seeing there was only two di'monds betwixt three men. First we had supper, and then tramped up and down the deck together smoking till most midnight; then we went and set down in my stateroom and locked the doors and looked in the piece of paper to see if the di'monds was all right, then laid it on the lower berth right in full sight; and there we set, and set, and by and by it got to be dreadful hard to keep awake. At last Bud Dixon he dropped off. As soon as he was snoring a good regular gait that was likely to last, and had his chin on his breast and looked permanent, Hal Clayton nodded towards the di'monds and then towards the

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outside door, and I understood. I reached and got the paper, and then we stood up and waited perfectly still; Bud never stirred; I turned the key of the outside door very soft and slow, then turned the knob the same way, and we went tiptoeing out.

"There warn't nobody stirring anywhere, and the boat was slipping along, swift and steady, through the big water in the smoky moonlight. We never said a word, but went straight up onto the hurricane-deck and plumb back aft, and set down on the end of the skylight. Both of us knowed what that meant, without having to explain to one another. Bud Dixon would wake up and miss the swag, and would come straight for us, for he ain't afeard of anything or anybody, that man ain't. He would come, and we would heave him overboard, or get killed trying. It made me shiver, because I ain't as brave as some people, but if I showed the white feather — well, I knowed better than do that. I kind of hoped the boat would land somers, and we could skip ashore and not have to run the risk of this row, I was so scared of Bud Dixon, but she was an upper-river tub and there warn't no real chance of that.

"Well, the time strung along and along, and that fellow never come! Why, it strung along till dawn begun to break, and still he never come. 'Thunder,' I says, 'what do you make out of this? — ain't it suspicious?' 'Land!' Hal says, 'do you reckon he's playing us? — open the paper!' I done it, and by gracious there warn't anything in it but a couple of little pieces of loaf-sugar! *That's* the reason he could set there and snooze all night so comfortable. Smart? Well, I reckon! He had had them two papers all fixed and ready, and he had put one of them in place of t'other right under our noses.

"We felt pretty cheap. But the thing to do, straight off, was to make a plan; and we done it. We would do up the paper again, just as it was, and slip in, very elaborate and soft, and lay it on the bunk again, and let on *we* didn't know about any trick, and hadn't any idea he was a-laughing at us behind them bogus snores of his'n; and we would stick by him, and the first night we was ashore we would get him drunk and search him, and get the di'monds; and *do* for him, too, if it warn't too risky. If we got the swag, we'd *got* to do for him, or he would hunt us down and do for us, sure. But I didn't have no real hope. I knowed we could get him drunk — he was always ready for that — but what's the good of it? You might search him a year and never find —

"Well, right there I catched my breath and broke off my thought! For an idea went ripping through my head that tore my brains to rags — and land, but I felt gay and good! You see, I had had my boots off, to unswell my feet, and just then I took up one of them to put it on, and I catched a glimpse of the heel-bottom, and it just took my breath away. You remember about that puzzlesome little screwdriver?"

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"You bet I do," says Tom.

"Well, when I catched that glimpse of that boot-heel, the idea that went smashing through my head was, *I* know where he'd hid the di'monds! You look at this boot-heel, now. See, it's bottomed with a steel plate, and the plate is fastened on with little screws. Now there wasn't a screw about that feller anywhere but in his boot-heels; so, if he needed a screw-driver, I reckoned I knowed why."

"Huck, ain't it bully!" says Tom.

"Well, I got my boots on, and we went down and slipped in and laid the paper of sugar on the berth, and sat down soft and sheepish and went to listening to Bud Dixon snore. Hal Clayton dropped off pretty soon, but I didn't; I wasn't ever so wide awake in my life. I was spying out from under the shade of my hat-brim, searching the floor for leather. It took me a long time, and I begun to think maybe my guess was wrong, but at last I struck it. It laid over by the bulkhead, and was nearly the color of the carpet. It was a little round plug about as thick as the end of your little finger, and I says to myself there's a di'mond in the nest you've come from. Before long I spied out the plug's mate.

"Think of the smartness and coolness of that blatherskite! He put up that scheme on us and reasoned out what we would do, and we went ahead and done it perfectly exact, like a couple of pudd'n-heads. He set there and took his own time to unscrew his heel-plates and cut out his plugs and stick in the di'monds and screw on his plates again. He allowed we would steal the bogus swag and wait all night for him to come up and get drownded, and by George it's just what we done! *I* think it was powerful smart."

"You bet your life it was!" says Tom, just full of admiration.

"Well, all day we went through the humbug of watching one another, and it was pretty sickly business for two of us and hard to act out, I can tell you. About night we landed at one of them little Missouri towns high up toward Iowa, and had supper at the tavern, and got a room upstairs with a cot and a double bed in it, but I dumped my bag under a deal table in the dark hall while we was moving along it to bed, single file, me last, and the landlord in the lead with a tallow candle. We had up a lot of whiskey, and went to playing high-low-jack for dimes, and as soon as the whiskey begun to take hold of Bud we stopped drinking, but we didn't let him stop. We loaded him till he fell out of his chair and laid there snoring.

"We was ready for business now. I said we better pull our boots off, and his'n too, and not make any noise, then we could pull him and haul him around and ransack him without any trouble. So we done it. I set my boots and Bud's side by side, where they'd be handy. Then we stripped him and searched his seams and his pockets and his socks and the inside of his boots, and everything, and searched his bundle. Never found any di'-

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monds. We found the screwdriver, and Hal says, 'What do you reckon he wanted with that?' I said I didn't know; but when he wasn't looking I hooked it. At last Hal he looked beat and discouraged, and said we'd got to give it up. That was what I was waiting for. I says:

" 'There's one place we hain't searched.'

" 'What place is that?' he says.

" 'His stomach.'

" 'By gracious, I never thought of that! *Now* we're on the home-stretch, to a dead moral certainty. How'll we manage?'

" 'Well,' I says, 'just stay by him till I turn out and hunt up a drug store, and I reckon I'll fetch something that'll make them di'monds tired of the company they're keeping.'

"He said that's the ticket, and with him looking straight at me I slid myself into Bud's boots instead of my own, and he never noticed. They was just a shade large for me, but that was considerable better than being too small. I got my bag as I went a-groping through the hall, and in about a minute I was out the back way and stretching up the river road.

"And not feeling so very bad, neither — walking on di'monds don't have no such effect. When I had gone fifteen minutes I says to myself, there's more'n a mile behind me, and everything quiet. Another five minutes and I says there's considerable more land behind me now, and there's a man back there that's begun to wonder what's the trouble. Another five and I says to myself he's getting real uneasy — he's walking the floor now. Another five, and I says to myself, there's two mile and a half behind me, and he's *awful* uneasy — beginning to cuss, I reckon. Pretty soon I says to myself, forty minutes gone — he *knows* there's something up! Fifty minutes — the truth's a-busting on him now! He is reckoning I found the di'monds whilst we was searching, and shoved them in my pocket and never let on — yes, and he's starting out to hunt for me. He'll hunt for new tracks in the dust, and they'll as likely send him down the river as up.

"Just then I see a man coming down on a mule, and before I thought I jumped into the bush. It was stupid! When he got abreast he stopped and waited a little for me to come out; then he rode on again. But I didn't feel gay any more. I says to myself I've botched my chances by that; I surely have, if he meets up with Hal Clayton.

"Well, about three in the morning I fetched Elexandria and see this stern-wheeler laying there, and was very glad, because I felt perfectly safe, now, you know. It was just daybreak. I went aboard and got this stateroom and put on these clothes and went up in the pilot-house — to watch, though I didn't reckon there was any need of it. I set there and played with my di'monds and waited and waited for the boat to start, but she didn't. You see, they was mending her machinery.

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"Well, to cut the tale short, we never left there till plumb noon; and long before that I was hid in this stateroom; for before breakfast I see a man coming, away off, that had a gait like Hal Clayton's, and it made me just sick. I says to myself, if he finds out I'm aboard this boat, he's got me like a rat in a trap. All he's got to do is to have me watched, and wait — wait till I slip ashore, thinking he is a thousand miles away, then slip after me and dog me to a good place and make me give up the di'monds, and then he'll — oh, *I* know what he'll do! Ain't it awful — awful! And now to think the *other* one's aboard, too! Oh, ain't it hard luck, boys — ain't it hard! But you'll help save me, *won't* you? — oh, boys, be good to a poor devil that's being hunted to death, and save me —"

We turned in and soothed him down and told him we would plan for him and help him, and he needn't be so afeard; and so by and by he got to feeling kind of comfortable again, and unscrewed his heel-plates and held up his di'monds this way and that, admiring them and loving them; and when the light struck into them they *was* beautiful, sure; why, they seemed to kind of bust, and snap fire out all around. But all the same I judged he was a fool. If I had been him I would 'a' handed the di'monds to them pals and got them to go ashore and leave me alone. But he was made different.

Twice we stopped to fix the machinery and laid a good while, once in the night; but it wasn't dark enough, and he was afeard to skip. But the third time we had to fix it there was a better chance. We laid up at a country woodyard about forty mile above Uncle Silas's place a little after one at night, and it was thickening up and going to storm. So Jake he laid for a chance to slide. We begun to take in wood. Pretty soon the rain come a-drenching down, and the wind blowed hard. Of course every boat-hand fixed a gunny-sack and put it on like a bonnet, the way they do when they are toting wood, and we got one for Jake, and he slipped down aft with his handbag and come tramping forrard just like the rest, and walked ashore with them, and when we see him pass out of the light of the torch-basket and get swallowed up in the dark, we got our breath again and just felt grateful and splendid. But it wasn't for long. Somebody told, I reckon; for in about eight of ten minutes them two pals come tearing forrard as tight as they could jump and darted ashore and was gone. We waited plumb till dawn for them to come back, and kept hoping they would, but they never did. We was awful sorry and low-spirited. All the hope we had was that Jake had got such a start that they couldn't get on his track, and he would get to his brother's and hide there and be safe.

He was going to take the river road, and told us to find out if Brace and Jubiter was to home and no strangers there, and then slip out about sundown and tell him. Said he would

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wait for us in a little bunch of sycamores right back of Tom's uncle Silas's tobacker-field.

We set and talked a long time about his chances, and Tom said he was all right if the pals struck up the river instead of down, but it wasn't likely, because maybe they knowed where he was from; more likely they would go right, and dog him all day, him not suspecting, and kill him when it come dark, and take the boots.

We didn't get done tinkering the machinery till away late in the afternoon, and so it was so close to sundown when we got home that we never stopped on our road, but made a break for the sycamores as tight as we could go, to tell Jake what the delay was, and have him wait till we could go to Brace's and find out how things was there. It was getting pretty dim by the time we turned the corner of the woods, sweating and panting with that long run, and see the sycamores thirty yards ahead of us; and just then we see a couple of men run into the bunch and heard two or three terrible screams for help. "Poor Jake is killed, sure," we says. We was scared through and through, and broke for the tobacker-field and hid there, trembling so our clothes would hardly stay on; and just as we skipped in there, a couple of men went tearing by, and into the bunch they went, and in a second out jumps four men and took out up the road as tight as they could go, two chasing two.

We laid down, kind of weak and sick, and listened for more sounds, but didn't hear none for a good while but just our hearts. We was thinking of that awful thing laying yonder in the sycamores, and it seemed like being that close to a ghost, and it give me the cold shudders. The moon come a-swelling up out of the ground, now, powerful big and round and bright, behind a comb of trees, like a face looking through prison bars, and the black shadders and white places begun to creep around, and it was miserable quiet and still and night-breezy and graveyardy and scary. All of a sudden Tom whispers:

"Look! — what's that?"

"Don't!" I says. "Don't take a person by surprise that way. I'm 'most ready to die, anyway, without you doing that."

"Look, I tell you. It's something coming out of the sycamores."

"Don't, Tom!"

"It's terrible tall!"

"Oh, lordy-lordy! let's —"

"Keep still — it's a-coming this way."

He was so excited he could hardly get breath enough to whisper. I had to look. I couldn't help it. So now we was both on our knees with our chins on a fence-rail and gazing — yes, and gasping, too. It was coming down the road — coming in the shadder of the trees, and you couldn't see it good; not till it was pretty close to us; then it stepped into a bright splotch of moonlight and we sunk right down in our tracks — *it was Jake Dunlap's ghost!*

(*to be continued next month*)

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QBI: QUEEN'S BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

BLACKMAIL DEPARTMENT: *Money Talks*

by ELLERY QUEEN

BLACKMAIL SPEAKS ITS OWN PECULiar dialect, but it has this advantage over other forms of expression: It is the universal language, understood by all.

Including the Sicilian. Mrs. Alfredo had heard its hissed accents, and she wept.

Ellery thought he had never seen a less likely victim. Mrs. Alfredo was as broad as a *gnoccho*, her skin had a time-grated Parmesan look, and her hands had been marinated in the Chianti of hard work. It seemed that she ran a very modest boardinghouse in the West Fifties which sagged under a mortgage. How, then, blackmail?

But then he heard about Mrs. Alfredo's daughter Lucia, and Lucia's Tosca, and how encouraging the Metropolitan Opera people had been about Lucia's *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*, and Ellery thought he detected the sibilant accent, too.

Lucia's career was in jeopardy.

"On what ground, Mrs. Alfredo?" he asked.

The ground was foreign. In her youth Mrs. Alfredo had been a cook. One summer an employer had taken her to England, in England she had met an Englishman, and the Englishman had married her. Perfidious Alfred! Within a month Alfred had vanished with her life's savings. What was worse, although eventually she recovered most of her money, the glamorous Alfred was discovered to possess another wife who claimed, and proved, priority. And what was worst, in inexorable course the poor woman found herself about to have Alfred's baby. Mrs. Alfredo, as she had begun to call herself, fled Bloomsbury for her adopted land, posing as a widow and never telling anyone except Lucia her bigamous secret; and in the prehistoric days when a house could be bought with the widow's mite she had purchased the ancient property in the West Fifties which was now her livelihood and the hope of Lucia's operatic career.

"Long time I scare that Lucia's secret come out," she wept to Ellery, "but then a friend from Bloomsbury write me that Alfred die, so Lucia and I forget our shame. Until now, *Signor*. Now it comes out. If I do not pay the money."

The crudely lettered note had been pushed under her bedroom door. Five thousand dollars was demanded for silence about her daughter's illegal state. "How do they know, *Signor* Queen? Never do we tell anyone — never!" The money was to be

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placed under the loose newel-post on the second-floor landing of her house.

"A boarder," said Ellery grimly. "How many boarders do you have, Mrs. Alfredo?"

"Three. Mist' Collins, Mist' —"

"Do you have five thousand dollars, Mrs. Alfredo?"

"*Si.* I do not pay off the mortgage — I save for Lucia's Voice Lesson. But if now I pay this money, Maestro Zaggiore give no more lesson! And if I do not pay, it will be known about me, about Lucia. It break Lucia's heart, *Signor.* Ruin her career. Already she is cry and cry over this."

"Young hearts take a heap of breaking and careers with real talent behind them don't ruin easily. Take my advice, Mrs. Alfredo: Don't pay."

"No," agreed Mrs. Alfredo with a certain cunning. " 'Cause you catch him quick, hey?"

The next morning Mrs. Alfredo's newest boarder awakened in one of her feather beds to an enchantment. "*Un bel dì,*" sang Cho-Cho-San in Italian," *vedremo levarsi un fil di fumo . . .*" The piano sounded as if it had served aboard the U. S. Gunboat *Abraham Lincoln* along with Lieutenant Pinkerton, but the voice coming through the aged walls rang as sweet and rich as a newly minted coin. And Ellery rose, and dressed like a struggling writer just in from Kansas City, and went downstairs to Mrs. Alfredo's dining-room determined that Lucia should have her chance.

At breakfast he met Lucia, who was beautiful, and the three boarders, who were not. Mr. Arnold was small, thin, pedantic, and looked like a clerk in a second-hand bookshop, which was exactly what he was; Mr. Bordelaux was medium-sized, fat, garrulous, and looked like a French wine salesman, which was exactly what *he* was; and Mr. Collins was large, powerful, and slangy and if he had not turned out to be a taxicab driver Ellery would have turned in his honorary police badge. They were all three amiable, they took turns ogling Lucia and praising Mrs. Alfredo's *uova con peperoni*, and they departed — Mr. Arnold for his Cooper Square bookshop, Mr. Bordelaux for his vinous rounds, and Mr. Collins for his battered taxi — all in a perfect corona of innocence.

The next three days were incidental. Ellery ransacked Mr. Arnold's room and Mr. Bordelaux's room and Mr. Collins' room. In the evenings and in the mornings he studied his ABCs, as he privately called the three boarders, discussing books with Mr. Arnold, wines with Mr. Bordelaux, and nags and dames with Mr. Collins. He tried to reassure Lucia, who was tragically desperate. He tried to get Mrs. Alfredo's permission to take the note and her story to the police, for their assistance along certain lines he had in mind; Mrs. Alfredo became hysterical. He advised her to deliver a note to the loose newel-post saying that it would take a few days to raise the money. This she consented to do, and Ellery care-

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fully refrained from insomnia that night, merely making sure that entry from outside the building would leave traces. And in the morning the note was gone and there were no traces. . . . Ellery did all the things one does in such cases, and what he gathered for his pains was the knowledge that the blackmailer was Mr. Arnold the book clerk, or Mr. Bordelaux the wine drummer, or Mr. Collins the taxi driver, and he had known that from the beginning.

But the fourth morning dawned with a bang. The emotional hand of Mrs. Alfredo was on his bedroom door, and its owner cried doom.

"My Lucia! She lock herself in her room! She does not answer! She is at least dead!"

Ellery soothed the frantic woman and hurried into the hall. From three doorways three heads protruded.

"Something wrong?" exclaimed Mr. Arnold.

"Is it that there is a fire?" cried Mr. Bordelaux.

"What gives?" growled Mr. Collins.

Ellery tried Lucia's door. It was latched from inside. He knocked. No answer. He listened. He heard nothing.

"Dr. Santelli!" moaned Mrs. Alfredo. "I get *il doctore!*"

"Do that," said Ellery. "Collins, help me break this door in."

"Lemme at it," said the powerful Mr. Collins.

But the old door was like iron.

"The ax of the fire," howled Mr. Bordelaux; and he flew down the stairs after Mrs. Alfredo, carpet slippers flapping.

"Here," panted Mr. Arnold, appearing with a chair. "Let's have a look through that fanlight." He scrambled onto the chair and peered through the transom above the door. "She's on the bed. She's been sick — "She's just lying there —"

"Any blood, Arnold?" asked Ellery anxiously.

"No . . . But there's a box of sweets. And a tin of something —"

"Oh, no," groaned Ellery. "Can you make out the label?"

Mr. Arnold's Adam's crabapple bobbed before the little rectangular window above the door. "It looks like . . . rat poison."

At which Mr. Bordelaux appeared with the fire ax and Mrs. Alfredo with an excited gentleman in his undershirt who looked like Arturo Toscanini. They all tumbled in to find that Lucia had attempted to commit suicide by filling some choclates with rat poison and bravely swallowing them.

"*Molto, molto,*" said Dr. Santelli happily. "Her tummy rejects. All to go out!" And later, the doctor called Mrs. Alfredo and Ellery in, and he said: "Lucia. *Cara.* Open the eye."

"Mama," quavered Lucia.

" '*Bina*," wept Mama.

But Ellery set Mama firmly to one side. "Lucia, the Met needs you — believe me! You're never to do such a foolish thing again. Anyway, you won't have to. Now I know who the blackmailer is."

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CHALLENGE TO THE READER: You now have all the facts. Pause and consider: Who is the blackmailer?

"My clients will press no charge," Ellery said later to the silent man holding the suitcase, "so long as you're smart enough to keep their secret. I might add, before you go, that you're much too careless to make a successful blackmailer."

"Careless?" said the man sullenly.

"Oh, criminally. Mrs. Alfredo and Lucia had never told anyone about the illegal marriage. So the blackmailer must have learned about it from the bigamist himself. But since Alfred was an Englishman who had lived — and died — in England, the great likelihood was that the blackmailer was English, too, you see.

"You've tried very hard to conceal it, but in the excitement of this morning's events you slipped. Only an Englishman would have called a rectangular transom a 'fanlight,' chocolates 'sweets,' and a can of poison a 'tin.' So if you're ever tempted to try a scoundrelly stunt like this again — watch your language, Mr. Arnold!"

'Q'

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly-paced mystery-thrillers, all MERCURY PUBLICATIONS, are now on sale at your newsstand:

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As a relief from the sophistication and psychological overtones of so many modern detective stories, as a sort of criminological change of pace, would you like to read a very short thriller of what might be called "the old school"? A yarn, for example, about a secret document "of vital importance to the national security" — indeed, we might go so far as to say, about a confidential report (on a new weapon of warfare, known to the innermost circle as XX-2), the theft of which would undoubtedly rock the very foundations of the Empire; and, of course, of the sad and desperate plight of at least one government official who is bound to lose his head if the document is not recovered — a fate admittedly worse than death.

Well, here is just such a tale, written, surprisingly enough, by one of the brightest lights among the newer British crimeteers — none other than Julian Symons, "a poet by preference, and a book reviewer by force of economic pressure," author of that fine and unusual bibliophilic mystery, BLAND BEGINNING, *and more recently, that even better novel of (to quote Anthony Boucher) "striking satire, bitter irony, and an odd sort of poetry,"* THE 31ST OF FEBRUARY.

A good spot of satire and irony is always refreshing these days of tough 'tecs and muddled emotions . . .

THE CASE OF XX-2

by JULIAN SYMONS

"PREPOSTEROUS," SAID QUARLES, AS he allowed himself to be hustled out of his office by young Mr. Hurley. The office overlooked Leicester Square, and its window proclaimed *Francis Quarles, Investigator.* "Ridiculous," said Quarles, as he lowered his bulky body into the back seat of an unobtrusive but luxurious car. Young Mr. Hurley murmured something to the driver and then got into a seat opposite Quarles.

"I do assure you, sir," he said, "that I would explain the position if I were allowed to. It really is an exceptional case, and important people are involved in it. I was given instructions to kidnap you if necessary." He was a fair-haired, open-faced young man who seemed to maintain an appearance of gravity only by an effort. "That will probably sound absurd," he added.

"I am in no doubt as to your energy," Quarles assured him. "And I am sure you would regard a kidnaping

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merely as something in the run of the day's work. But I should be happy to know some details of the matter of life and death on which you wish to consult me."

"I'm sorry, sir. It's not my story." Young Mr. Hurley blushed. "Though in a sense it's only too much my story."

"And the important people involved?"

Young Mr. Hurley mentioned a name, and it was the name of a very important person indeed. After that there was silence, until they reached their destination in Pall Mall. Here Mr. Hurley hustled and bustled Quarles up marble steps, through an entrance hall and into an elevator. He asked Quarles to wait and rushed away down a corridor. A few moments later he was back and shepherding Quarles into a room where a man sat behind a large desk. Quarles had never met the man, but he had seen his photograph many times in the newspapers. He was the very important person — one of the most important Ministers of the day — mentioned by Hurley in the car. The Minister, when he stood up to shake hands, was revealed as an even bigger man than the detective. He spoke in the homely voice, with just a touch of Lancashire accent, that was one of his two claims to popular fame. The other was his irascibility.

"Mr. Quarles, I owe you a personal apology for bringing you here in this unorthodox way. But the situation didn't allow for ordinary conventions. I'm calling on your help as a citizen, Mr. Quarles, in a national emergency."

The Minister's gaze was direct and compelling. The answering stare of Quarles's small black eyes was equally direct. "Tell me what you want."

"Three days ago," the Minister said, "a document of vital importance to the national safety was stolen from Hurley." He made a gesture towards the young man who stood like a watchdog by the door.

"What document?"

"It was typed on four large sheets of foolscap paper and folded into a foolscap envelope."

"Its nature?"

"It was a confidential report sent to me by a certain department. It gave details of the steps that are being taken in this country for the manufacture, should it be necessary, of a certain weapon of warfare. The weapon is at present secret. It is known as XX-2."

"And you want me to discover the thief?"

"No, no, Mr. Quarles!" The Minister was almost impatient. "I thought Hurley might have told you that much. We know the thief — he is a man named Zelbec. We want you to recover the document." The Minister's gaze was straight at Quarles as he added, "Illegally, if necessary."

Quarles sat back in his chair. "You had better tell me about it."

Three days before, on Monday of that week, the Minister had in-

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structed Hurley to bring the XX-2 report down to Watermead in Norfolk, where he was taking a holiday which included a conference with certain allied diplomats and military men. Hurley had received a telephone call just after he had taken the report, in its sealed envelope, out of the safe in the Minister's room. The call purported to come from the staff of one of the allies with whom the Minister was conferring, and the caller mentioned the XX-2 report by name. The caller said that his name was Robins, and that he was speaking from the Minister's residence. He and Hurley talked amiably for a minute or two, but Hurley became suspicious when Robins asked casually about the train on which Hurley was traveling, so that he could be met at Watermead Station. Hurley asked to speak to the Minister, and the line went dead.

"Just a moment," Quarles said. "Exactly how many people know about the XX-2 report?"

The Minister shook his head. "Too many for us to make any check-up by that means."

"And where was it while you were telephoning?" Quarles asked Hurley.

The young man flushed. "In the Minister's room next door. But it was on the desk, in exactly the same place, when I returned."

The Minister was tapping his desk with a broad, flat fingernail. "I told you, Mr. Quarles, that we know the name of the thief. We also know how and where the theft was committed. If you would kindly listen," and the Minister continued to relate the facts.

Hurley, his suspicions roused, tried to ring the Minister at Watermead, but failed to reach him. (It was discovered later that the wires had been cut.) He took an earlier train instead of the one he had planned, telling the Minister's assistant-secretary, Macpherson, to get this information through as soon as possible. A few minutes later Macpherson, still unable to get through, sent a wire in code for urgent delivery. Hurley then boarded the train —

"Tell him about Macpherson," said the irrepressible Hurley. The Minister frowned.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"It was an extremely odd thing to happen, sir." Hurley said to Quarles: "Macpherson left after sending that code message and was knocked over by a hit-and-run driver almost as soon as he was out of the door. Nearly killed — they brought him in here and he's been unconscious ever since. Chap didn't stop and nobody got his number."

"Hurley," said the Minister, and young Hurley, unabashed, said, "Sorry, sir."

Hurley boarded the train, the Minister resumed, carrying the XX-2 report in his brown brief-case. There was nobody in his carriage, but an amiable foreign gentleman sat opposite him at lunch. This gentleman must have managed to drop something potent into Hurley's coffee, for on his return to the carriage Hurley felt

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extraordinarily sleepy. He fell asleep and by the time he woke, he had traveled some distance beyond Watermead. On the rack above him was a brown brief-case — but it was not Hurley's brief-case, and it contained only wads of newspaper. His brief-case, with the XX-2 report in it, was gone.

The Minister told the end of this story almost with a grim relish, his eye firmly fixed on Hurley, who wriggled with embarrassment. When Hurley was shown a number of photographs of well-known agents he unhesitatingly picked out the picture of a man named Zelbec as that of the man who had sat opposite him at lunch.

"And Zelbec is a foreign agent?" The Minister nodded. "For what power?"

"My dear Mr. Quarles," the Minister said in a tone of some superiority, "Zelbec has no national patriotism of any kind. He simply works for those who pay him. He has even worked for us."

"Why don't you arrest him?"

"On what charge? Drinking coffee with Hurley?" The Minister leaned his large body forward. "But there is another reason. You understand that I can name no names, but we believe we know the power that most likely is employing Zelbec. Now, here is the interesting thing: we also have means of knowing — positive knowledge, mind you — that the XX-2 report has not yet reached them. Even more: Zelbec has not been in touch with them, nor with anyone else likely to be interested. For some reason of his own, he is playing a waiting game. That gives us a chance to send somebody to see him. Since the prime purpose of such a visit would be to regain the document — by any means that seem suitable, Mr. Quarles — obviously the emissary cannot be official." He coughed. "The responsible authorities have advised me that I could have no better unofficial agent than yourself." Quarles nodded agreement with the remark. "But you must understand that you will have no status and that you can be given no protection. I can assure you, however, that your services will not be forgotten."

"One thing strikes me," said Quarles. "Why doesn't Zelbec make half a dozen copies of the XX-2 report and sell them in half a dozen places?"

"Because he wants to stay alive," the Minister said grimly. "Well, Mr. Quarles —"

Again young Hurley was unable to repress himself.

"The burglary, sir. You haven't told him about the burglary."

"Nothing to do with it," the Minister said impatiently.

Quarles asked, "What burglary?" — and it was Hurley who replied.

"Last night — just after midnight — somebody tried to get in here — not into the offices, but into the living quarters. Cut a pane of glass and came in through the window. Fortunately the night watchman was alert and spotted the chap before he could do

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any damage. Didn't catch him, though."

The Minister looked rather ostentatiously at his watch, and shot out a hand. "Good luck, Mr. Quarles."

The agent Zelbec, a squat man with powerful shoulders, a completely bald head and an almost perpetual smile, lived in a neat semi-detached house at Worcester Park. He was in the garden pruning rose bushes when Quarles pushed open the little wooden gate. Quarles had decided that the element of surprise was not important. He had telephoned for an appointment, mentioning "a certain document," and Zelbec led him inside the house where a pretty girl, introduced as the foreign agent's daughter, gave them iced coffee. Quite bluntly Quarles stated his case: Zelbec was in possession of a document; what was he prepared to accept for it?

"Permit me to ask, Mr. Quarles, for whom are you acting?"

Quarles sipped his iced coffee. "There is no reason why I should conceal from you that I am representing the British Government."

"And supposing I am in possession of this document — which I do not admit for a moment, you understand — what can you offer for it?"

"What would you say to a hundred thousand pounds?"

Behind the smile Zelbec seemed disturbed. "You mean that?"

"Certainly. You don't suppose," Quarles chuckled, "that I have brought the money with me. But I can obtain it in two hours. Of course, you have the document?"

There was the faintest possible hesitation before Zelbec replied, "Of course."

"And you will let me see it?" Zelbec shook his bald head. "My dear Mr. Zelbec, you can satisfy yourself that I am unarmed. I will then stand with my hands above my head and you can cover me with the revolver which I see is unsettling the fit of your jacket. All I ask is that you let me see the document in question."

Zelbec wiped perspiration away from his forehead. "No," he said. And then: "Is it that important to you?"

"You should know the importance of the document, Mr. Zelbec. Or don't you know?" Quarles said tauntingly, "Are you *unable* to show it?"

The smile on Zelbec's face was suddenly wiped out. The revolver Quarles had mentioned was in his hand. "Get out," he said.

"Thank you." Quarles stood up. "You have been most helpful."

He got out.

The Minister contemplated Quarles with no particular friendliness. "You have not got the report?" Quarles shook his head. "You have failed?" Quarles shook his head again, and said to young Hurley, "Why are you wearing a black tie?"

"Poor old Macpherson — remember I told you he was knocked over by a hit-and-run driver — he died this morning."

"Died!" Quarles said. "What have

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you done with his clothes? The ones he was wearing at the time of the accident?"

"Why, I don't know —"

"Where's his room?"

A bewildered Hurley led Quarles up two flights of stairs and into a room where something lay on a bed covered with a sheet. On a chair was a blood-stained, gray suit. Quarles felt in it rapidly. "There should be — ah, yes, here it is. A secret pocket in the lining." He took a knife from his pocket. "And here —" he slit the lining and produced a long envelope, "— is the XX-2 report."

Hurley gasped and looked at the thing on the bed. "But *Macpherson* —"

"Yes," said Quarles. "Macpherson."

"It was a simple but ingenious plot," Quarles said to a remarkably subdued Hurley and an attentive Minister, "with two strings to it. First of all, there was Macpherson, prepared with an envelope, all ready to make the substitution here if possible; then there was Zelbec, if Macpherson failed.

"But Macpherson didn't fail. The XX-2 report was stolen by him, and the other envelope substituted, while Hurley was occupied with that telephone call. Then to remove suspicion from Macpherson, Zelbec went solemnly through the farce of doping Hurley's coffee and stealing his briefcase — thereby identifying himself as the thief. In the meantime, Macpherson went out to deliver the report — and the totally unexpected happened. He was knocked down by a car."

"But I don't see how you worked it out," Hurley said.

"Two deductions. First: if Zelbec had the report, why hadn't it already reached the power for whom he was acting? Could it be because he *didn't* have it? That something had gone wrong? To test this, I offered Zelbec a fantastic sum of money for the document — *providing he could produce it!* If he were really holding it to sell to the highest bidder, as you suggested, my offer of a hundred thousand pounds must tempt him. But he could not produce the report. And, as you knew positively, he hadn't passed it on. Now to the basis for the second deduction. I asked myself: who else could have stolen it? It could have been Hurley." Hurley started. "But if Hurley had stolen the report and faked being drugged, there was no reason why he shouldn't have already passed it on by the time I was called in. So I was left with only one answer to my questions: who could (a) have stolen the report, and (b) have been unable, through some unforeseen event, to pass it on? I remembered Macpherson's accident, I remembered the attempt at burglary — and I knew that logically the report must be somewhere in Macpherson's clothing. And there it was."

"One thing you haven't explained, Mr. Quarles," the Minister said. "Who was the hit-and-run driver?"

"Considering the circumstances," Quarles said, "I think we might say his name was Providence."

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THE DRAGOON PISTOL

by FRANK GRUBER

WITH ONE EYE ON THE BIG clock, John Parker shrunk down under the level of his high bookkeeper's desk and began to peel off his black sleeve guards. The task concluded, he folded them together and surreptitiously slid open the desk drawer a few inches. He dropped the sleeve guards inside and took out a small whisk broom. Stooping again, he carefully brushed his trousers and finally got a piece of thick flannel from the drawer and rubbed the light film of dust from his shoes.

He timed the work very nicely, so that when he straightened and again looked at the clock it was exactly one-half minute to twelve. It took thirty seconds to straighten his books on the desk, so that when the bell rang he was able to step around the desk and move promptly toward the cloakroom.

And then he met the frowning eye of Mr. Wilton, the office manager. Mr. Wilton kept his glance on John Parker for one moment, then raised his eyes deliberately to the wall clock. Mr. Wilton did not approve of clock watchers, and although Parker was not beating the clock, he was a little too prompt in obeying its message.

The incident dulled Parker's enthusiasm. All morning, he had been looking forward to the lunch hour. He wasn't ordinarily a clock watcher, but today he had been planning something special and had wanted to take advantage of every minute of the sixty allotted for his lunch hour. He was even going to skip his lunch. And now the edge of it had been blunted. He wouldn't really enjoy the auction.

This was a good one, too. It had been advertised in the preceding Sunday papers. John Parker loved auctions. A more or less indifferent bookkeeper in the offices of the Arthur Grain Company, he was one of the best auction bidders in the city. He could bid on a dozen offerings and never get stuck once. He had an instinct for it. Although he lived in a small furnished room, Parker would bid with genuine enthusiasm on a mahogany tallboy and at the exact moment when the price was about right, drop out of the bidding and let the competitor have the tallboy.

Take today. The effects of one Harrison Phillips were to be sold. John Parker knew what to expect. Massive old furniture, musty books, a mysterious ancient trunk or two, and a miscellany of statuary monstrosities. Parker had about as much use for any of these objects as he would have had for a zebra, but he would bid enthusiastically on everything that was offered, during the

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brief forty-five minutes that he would attend the auction, and he wouldn't have to make a single purchase.

It was exactly six minutes after twelve when he entered the auction rooms and found them pleasantly filled with potential bidders. Parker liked competition.

He moved forward and found a seat in the first row which he promptly occupied. He looked up at the auctioneer, a tremendously fat man with a deep bass voice.

"I am offered two dollars and thirty cents," the auctioneer was saying. "Two dollars and thirty cents for this magnificent set of hand-forged andirons. Ladies and gentlemen, I could get more from a junk dealer. I could —"

"Two thirty-five," John Parker said.

"Two thirty-five," said the auctioneer. "A connoisseur has just entered the bidding, a gentleman of the old school who knows real values. I am offered two thirty-five for these marvelous implements that are as good today as the day they were first forged and which cost the owner perhaps as much as seventy-five or eighty dollars. Two thirty-five; who'll offer five dollars?"

"Two and a half," called a man from the rear.

"Two fifty, who'll give three dollars? Who'll give two seventy-five?"

"I will," said John Parker and from that moment on remained quiet.

The auctioneer blustered and cajoled for two or three minutes, finally received an offer of two dollars and eighty-five cents, and sold the andirons. He scowled down on John Parker, for the latter was not unknown to the auctioneer.

The auctioneer's assistant brought up a beautiful statue of a nude woman holding a bunch of grapes over her head. It was solid marble and had undoubtedly graced a pedestal in the home of Harrison Phillips for at least fifty years.

The fat auctioneer scowled at the marble monstrosity and waved it away. He rummaged about on the long counter for a moment, then brought out a huge pistol.

"Gentlemen," he boomed. "I say, gentlemen, for this item will interest very few women, but it should delight the heart of every man present, especially those of you who are collectors. Gentlemen, I offer for your pleasure one of the finest items in this entire valuable collection: a dragoon pistol in perfect condition. This beautiful old gun, gentlemen, was the major factor in the winning of the West. It may even have been in use during the late Civil War, although you would not think so, judging from its perfect condition. That is due to the fact that the late owner was a real collector and kept his treasures under glass, taking them out only to clean. Now, gentlemen, I am not going to insult your intelligence by asking you to start bidding with one dollar; I am not going to waste your time with such nonsense, because you know and

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I know that this rare old dragoon pistol will sell for many times that. So who'll give fifty dollars?"

There was absolute silence in the audience and the auctioneer clapped a fat hand to his forehead. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, why are you here? Because it's cold outside and it's raining? No, it can't be that, because the weather is beautiful and the sun is shining. Because you're tired and want to rest your feet? It must be that, because otherwise you would be clamoring to bid for this genuine —"

"One dollar!" said John Parker.

The auctioneer gave him a withering glance. "I'll pretend I did not hear that remark. I'll pretend that the gentleman was only trying to have a little clean, honest fun, because no one could be serious in offering one dollar for this treasure."

"Ten dollars!"

John Parker blinked and then jerked around in his chair. No legitimate bidder would jump from one to ten dollars, particularly not for an offering such as this.

He said: "Ten dollars and a quarter," then kept his gaze upon the audience in order to find the rash bidder. He had no trouble finding him, for the man was directly behind Parker, and the moment the latter had made his offer, the other man snapped: "Twenty dollars!"

A murmur ran through the audience and even the auctioneer took a step forward on his platform to stare down at the rash bidder.

Parker studied the other bidder with great care. He wasn't a professional bidder, of course, but Parker was trying to size him up. He did not look like a prosperous individual, if his clothing meant anything. He wore a rather tight-fitting suit of broadcloth that had once been black but had a greenish tinge to it now, indicating age and much wear. He was a deep-chested, hard-faced man with sandy hair, the latter long overdue for a haircut. He wore a battered black felt hat with a broader than usual brim. He looked like a farmer. In that case, he *might* have money, despite his appearance.

John Parker said: "Twenty-one dollars."

"Twenty-five," came the prompt bid from the other man.

John Parker turned again in his seat, smiling pleasantly, so the other could see there was no offense in the competitive bidding. Merely good sportsmanship. Something in the man's face startled Parker. The eyes. They were a pale, washed out blue; they were staring eyes — and cold.

"Twenty-six dollars," Parker said.

"Forty dollars!"

Parker cleared his throat. Of course, the old gun wasn't worth one-half that, but then Parker wasn't interested in the object of the bidding. He was attending this auction sale for the same reason that some men go to prizefights and wrestling matches. Or ball games.

He said: "Forty-one dollars."

And at last he drew blood. The

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man behind him gasped hoarsely and his breathing came heavily. "Fifty dollars," he roared.

Parker turned and received such a look of malevolence that he winced and remained silent.

The auctioneer glanced at him and began to do his stuff. "Fifty dollars I am offered for this rare *objet d'art;* fifty dollars —"

Parker could not help himself; the sport was too deeply ingrained in him. He knew that the man behind him was determined to possess the dragoon pistol at all costs, and it was not sporting to let him have it so easily. He would value it the more if he paid a decent price for it, if he got it only after a stiff fight.

Parker said: "Fifty-one dollars!"

The effect of this bid was startling. The man behind Parker leaped to his feet and uttered a cry of rage. "Damn you," he roared. "I haven't got any more money with me. Take the gun — take it and be sorry!"

And with that he stamped down the aisle, out of the auction rooms.

"— going," said the auctioneer, "going for fifty-one dollars."

John Parker recoiled. *He* was the lucky bidder. It so happened that this was the sixteenth of the month and only the day before he had received his semi-monthly salary — fifty-five dollars. It was all in his pocket, as he had missed his landlady the night before and had not yet paid his room rent.

But he didn't want the gun; he couldn't *afford* it, even if he did have a use for it. If he spent fifty-one dollars now, he would be unable to pay his room rent. He would have nothing left for his meals during the next two weeks. He would —

"Here you are, sir," said the auctioneer. "You won after a mighty fine struggle and I congratulate you. Fifty-one dollars —"

John Parker stumbled forward and took the huge dragoon pistol. It was almost a foot long and weighed ten pounds or more. He shuddered and drew the money from his pocket.

Then he turned and walked out of the auction rooms. At the door he collided with a woman about to enter. She saw the object in his hand and squealed.

Parker stepped aside without an apology. He thrust the big weapon under his coat, pressing his left arm against it to hold it secure.

He walked several blocks up Dearborn before he realized that he was going in the wrong direction and cut west to LaSalle, where he turned south. As he crossed Monroe he noted by a clock in a store window, that it was two minutes after one. Damn, now he would catch it from Mr. Wilton, the office manager.

He continued a little farther down LaSalle, then turned into a tall office building and rode up to the twelfth floor. As he entered the offices of the Arthur Grain Company he saw that it was eight minutes after one by the time-clock just inside the door.

He strode through the office toward the cloakroom. And there, just as he

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was about to enter, he encountered Mr. Wilton.

There was a gleam in the office manager's eye. "Ah, good evening, Mr. Parker," he said, sarcastically. "Did you have a pleasant lunch at the club? Did you engage in a little bridge, perhaps . . . ?"

John Parker reached under his coat and produced the big pistol. Holding it by the butt, he laid the long barrel on the left temple of Mr. Wilton.

Mr. Wilton screamed and fell to the floor like a dead pigeon.

John Parker stared down at the unconscious form of the office manager. He was aware that there was excitement all around him.

"Parker laid out Wilton!" someone cried in a tone of awe. And another: "The worm turned — Caspar Milquetoast conked the boss."

It was true, but to what an extent not even John Parker knew at that moment. He only knew that something had happened to him. It was as if an iron chain that had bound his conscience all his life had suddenly snapped. He was free.

Wilton had persecuted him a thousand times and at last Parker had struck back. Savagely . . . yet he had no regrets.

He finally raised his head and looked around the circle of faces that ringed him. "He had it coming to him," he muttered.

"Yeah, sure," Doolin said. Doolin was the office bully, and now he looked into Parker's eyes and took a backward step.

Beyond the immediate circle a voice cried petulantly. "Here, here, what's going on? Are you people working here or are you just playing games?"

"J. B.," someone said, and the office employees began to disperse, leaving John Parker to face J. B. Arthur, the head of the firm.

"Here, you," old J. B. snapped. "Get back to — what have you done to Wilton?" A gasp "What's that in your hand — a gun?"

"Yeah," said Parker. "You want to make something of it?"

J. B. Arthur's eyes threatened to pop from his head. "What's that? You dare to speak to *me* like that —?"

Parker smiled crookedly and advanced upon J. B. The president of the Arthur Grain Company was too astounded for a moment to move, but when he saw the gun in Parker's hand come up he let out a shriek that could have been heard down on LaSalle Street, and whirling, started for his private office in a headlong rush.

Deliberately, Parker brought up the ancient gun. He squeezed the trigger and was not surprised when the gun thundered and a pane of ground glass crashed in the door of old J. B.'s private office.

Arthur screamed again and diving into his office, headed for the lavatory. Gaining its comparative safety, he locked himself inside.

But John Parker did not pursue. He was no longer interested in J. B. Arthur, or anyone connected with the Arthur Grain Company. He

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stuck the old revolver under his coat once more and sauntered out of the office.

Outside, he walked to Clark Street and caught a northbound street car. Fifteen minutes later he alighted at Lincoln Park and walked four blocks west and a half block south, finally turning into a dingy three-story brick building.

He entered a door and started to climb a worn flight of stairs. When he was halfway up a woman came out to the landing on the first floor and called to him:

"Oh, Mr. Parker, I just wanted to remind you. You forgot the rent."

Parker turned slowly. "I didn't forget it."

"Then you can give it to me now. Seven dollars for the half month, you know."

Parker said: "Go to hell."

Mrs. Leonard, a stout, motherly-looking woman blinked, and then gasped. "What did you say?"

Parker repeated the phrase, then turned and continued climbing to the second floor. He walked down the long dark hall until he reached the last room on the left-hand side. He opened the door — it was never locked — and switched on the electric light, for it was so dark in the room a light was needed even in midafternoon.

A man was sitting in the creaking rocking-chair that stood next to Parker's bed. It was the man from the auction rooms, the unsuccessful bidder for the old dragoon pistol.

As Parker entered, the man rose from the chair and towered over Parker. He was no more than six feet tall and weighed perhaps 190 pounds, but compared to Parker's five-seven and 147 pounds he was a veritable giant.

Yet Parker returned him look for look. "What are you doing in my room?" Parker demanded.

"The gun," the other man said. "I want it."

"Then you should have outbid me."

"I didn't have any more money. But you don't want that gun. You haven't any use for it."

"I can sell it," Parker sneered. "It's evidently a rare specimen."

"No, it isn't. It's a plain, ordinary Navy Colt. They made thousands of them during the Civil War and this one is no better than hundreds that are still in existence. Any gun collector will sell you one just like it for twenty dollars."

"Then why did *you* bid fifty dollars for it?"

"Because it's my gun."

Parker glowered. "If it's your gun how'd it happen to get into the effects of Harrison Phillips?"

"His father acquired it some years ago. Harrison Phillips didn't know to whom it belonged originally."

"Then why didn't you buy it from Phillips?"

"He wouldn't sell."

"And you think I will. Well, you're wrong. I won't. I bought this gun fair and square and I'm going to keep it."

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"It'll be the sorriest thing you've ever done. *I* know, believe me."

John Parker took the gun from under his coat and hefted it in his hand. "I like the gun."

"Yes, I know. And you've already used it. Another inch to the right and you'd have killed J. B. Arthur. Next time you won't miss."

Parker's eyes became slits. "What do you know about J. B. Arthur?"

The other man shrugged. "I saw what you did. You laid out Wilton and then you took a shot at Arthur. And now you're planning to take a shot at me."

The hair seemed to stand up on the back of Parker's neck. But there was no thought in his mind of backing down.

"Who the devil are you?"

"The original owner of that gun."

"You're crazy. You said yourself that Harrison Phillips's father had acquired this gun from the original owner. I happen to know that Harrison Phillips was over 70 when he died."

"That's right. His father got the gun in 1882."

Parker laughed harshly. "Now, I know you're crazy. You're not over 38 or 40 at the most."

A grim smile played over the big man's mouth. "I killed my first man — with that gun — in 1864 —"

Parker hefted the big revolver once more, then suddenly pointed it at the other man. "All right, put 'em up. I'm going to call the wagon and have you taken back to that booby hatch from which you — hey —!"

Parker pressed the trigger and the room rocked to the deafening explosion. Through the haze of black smoke came a mocking laugh. "I'll see you again."

Suddenly Parker was alone.

He whirled and leaped to the door. A quick glance down the hall showed him that it was empty. He darted back into the room, circled the rocking-chair, and sprang to the window. It was down tight — and locked.

There were no closets in the room, only a row of nails in the wall upon which hung Parker's meager supply of clothing.

"I'll be damned," Parker muttered. "Where'd he go?"

After a moment his eyes came to a focus on a patch of broken plaster behind the bed. He straddled the bed and examined the plaster. Yes, a bullet had gone in here. He'd completely missed the big man. Either that or the bullet had gone clean through him and embedded itself in the wall. But in that case, the man wouldn't have been able to make such a swift getaway. In fact, he couldn't have made a getaway at all. Yet he was gone. The smoke from the black powder had made a haze and he had seemingly disappeared into it.

Parker turned to the door but before he stepped out, he heard the heavy tramp of many feet. Ah —!

He leaped out and thrust his gun down the hall. "Stand where you are!" he thundered.

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The hall was full of policemen. They had guns in their hands.

"Take it easy, buddy," the leader declared. "The heat's been too much for you, but you don't want to get into no more serious trouble than you're in now. Put down that cannon —"

"Back," snarled Parker. "Get back or I'll blast the lot of you."

"Don't shoot!" cried the policeman. "I'm sure Mr. Arthur won't press his complaint. We got our duty to do, you know —"

Parker fired into the solid mass of blue. In the confined quarters he couldn't miss. The ancient Navy Colt made a tremendous noise as it went off. Police revolvers barked in reply and bullets splattered along the narrow hall. The aiming was very poor, however. The policemen were too demoralized. They were already trying to retreat and as Parker charged, firing into their midst, they broke completely and pitched down the staircase. One or two lost their footing and tripped the others, and the lot of them went down in a solid pile — except a couple who remained on the hall floor upstairs.

Parker followed to the stairwell and sent one final shot after them. Then the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. With an oath, Parker drew back. He tried to snap out the cylinder and found that it was a stationary one. In fact, the revolver didn't use cartridges. It had a series of tiny nipples over which were fitted small copper caps. The loads were evidently forced into the chambers from the front. In short, it was a cap-and-ball pistol. And Parker, having used up all six loads, couldn't reload.

He swore roundly and retreated down the hall. There was a fire escape at the rear of the building. He navigated it successfully, coming down to the ground in the backyard. He clambered over a wooden fence and scooted through a semi-dark hallway of a house, and finally emerged upon another street.

By that time he had put the gun away under his coat and walked swiftly up the street. At the corner he turned east and found a drugstore. Entering, he went to the telephone at the rear of the store and consulted the classified phone directory. He found what he sought under "G" and nodded in satisfaction.

Twenty minutes later, John Parker stepped out of an elevator in a dingy building on Wells Street and proceeded toward a ground-glass door. He pushed it open and entered a gloomy gunsmith's shop. The walls were hung with scores of guns of all shapes and sizes and in all stages of repair.

A fat, bald man with grimy hands got up from a work bench and came up behind a glass counter. "Yes, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I've a gun," Parker said. "I'd like you to look at it." He took it out from under his coat and extended it to the gunsmith. The latter took it and sniffed the muzzle.

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"It's been fired lately."

Parker grunted. "I was doing some target practice with it."

The gunsmith nodded, then snapped the trigger. "It seems to work all right."

"Oh, yes, that wasn't what I wanted. I'm interested in getting an idea of the gun's value, that's all."

"Oh! Well, it's a Navy Colt. Probably the best revolver ever made by Samuel Colt. So good that almost every gun you find of its type is still in working condition."

"What's it worth?"

"That's the trouble. Colt made 600,000 of these and a good many thousand are still in existence. Maybe twelve-fifteen dollars."

"This one's worth more," growled Parker. "A good deal more."

"Not to me it isn't. I've got a half-dozen in the shop now."

"As good as this one?"

"Every bit. I'll show you. . . ."

"But you can't shoot them. The bullets —"

The gunsmith smiled. "A good many gun fanciers still shoot these guns. I carry a supply of caps, balls, and the old-time paper cartridges."

"Let's see them," Parker cried eagerly.

The gunsmith hesitated a moment, then shrugged and went to a shelf. He brought out three boxes of different sizes and putting them on the glass counter, picked up Parker's Navy Colt. He detached the small ramrod and removed the used copper caps. He replaced them with new ones from a box and then picked up a paper cartridge containing powder. He tore the paper with his teeth and poured powder into a chamber, after which he wrapped a lead ball into a flannel patch and poked it down on top of the powder.

Parker watched the proceedings closely, but when the gunsmith had loaded three chambers he suddenly snatched the gun from his hands. "I can fill the rest myself. Now bring out your money!"

The gunsmith's mouth fell open in astonishment. "What-what?"

"You heard me; shell out. This is a hold-up."

"But — but I haven't got any money —"

"I'm going to count to three," Parker said, ominously. "One — two —"

"I'll give it to you," cried the gunsmith. "Just a minute and I'll give you everything I've got." He scrambled to an old steel safe and began fumbling with the combination.

He got it right after a couple of false attempts and swung open the door. His hand darted in, he whirled and came up with an efficient-looking automatic. "Now," he began.

That was the last word he ever spoke. The Navy Colt in Parker's fist thundered and the .36 caliber bullet whacked into the gunsmith's head.

Parker sprang around the counter and swooped down on the open safe, hurdling the dead body of the gun-

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smith. He reached into the safe and took out a tin box. A chagrined exclamation escaped his lips, for the box contained only three one-dollar bills.

He stuffed the money in a pocket and came around the counter once more. He picked up the three boxes containing caps, powder cartridges, and leaden balls, and distributing them about his person left the gunsmith's shop.

At the elevator bank he pushed the down button. The light overhead showed white and the elevator door opened. A man stepped out and Parker took a backward step.

It was the big man who claimed ownership of the Navy Colt.

The elevator door clanged shut and the big man grinned wolfishly at Parker.

"Nice going," he said. "A couple more today and you'll equal my record at Centralia."

"Who are you?" Parker gasped hoarsely.

"Don't you know?"

"No, but I think — say, how'd you know what I just did?"

"The same way I knew about what you did at your office, then at your rooming house. I was watching you —"

"But you couldn't have!"

"Oh, but I could. And I'll be watching you *right* along. You're pretty good — with *my* gun."

Parker reached under his coat and gripped the butt of the revolver. The big man held up his hand. "Save your powder. I've a proposition to make to you."

"Talk fast," said Parker. "Talk fast, because I'm getting awfully fed up with you."

"Swell. I think you'll make a good partner. Now, listen. I've cased this layout and I think it's a soft touch for two good men. We ought to get, say, 30,000."

"Dollars?"

"In good Federal notes. No Confederate stuff."

"Where is it?"

The big man laughed. "Deal?"

"I'm keeping the gun."

"All right, keep it. I've got a six-shooter of my own. We may have to use our guns, but you're not afraid of that. They can't hang you any deader for one more. And you can do a lot of traveling with $15,000 dollars."

Fifteen, thought John Parker. Thirty thousand — and one extra bullet.

Parker was reading the evening edition of the morning newspaper. A headline screamed at him:

KILLER TERRORIZES CITY

And in smaller headlines:

BOOKKEEPER RUNS AMOK
SHOOTS AT EMPLOYER
KILLS ONE POLICEMAN
WOUNDS ANOTHER AND
MURDERS GUNSMITH
MOST DANGEROUS KILLER IN
ANNALS OF POLICE HISTORY

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The big man, who said his name was Howard, touched John Parker's arm. "All right, we'd better get started. But I'm warning you, it's going to be close. If you haven't got the nerve —"

Parker tossed the newspaper out of the car window. "Let's go!"

He stepped on the starter and as the motor roared, shifted into first. It was a big, powerful car. Parker had picked it out on Michigan Boulevard. He shifted into second and zoomed up West Adams Street.

They crossed the river and turned left into Canal Street. Parker found a parking place and stopped the car. He locked the ignition and put the key in his pocket, where he could get it quickly.

"Now, we'll see who's got the nerve," he said to his companion.

Both got out of the car and walked across the street to the huge railroad terminal. They entered and walked briskly up a ramp into the giant waiting-room.

"Take a look around," suggested Howard. "We've got to head the right way when we're finished and there are so many doors —"

"I know this place as well as my own room," Parker said, and then wondered if he had really known his room at all. Howard had made a rather easy getaway from it that afternoon.

They approached the ticket windows, but when they reached them made a sharp right turn and went to a door, marked *Private*. Howard rapped on the door with his knuckles.

Inside a voice called: "Yes?"

"Despatcher," Howard replied.

There was a moment's pause and then the door was opened a few inches, by a man in a blue uniform. Howard put a big hand on the man's chest and gave him a violent shove into the room. He followed himself, but Parker swarmed around him and whipping the big Navy Colt from under his coat laid it across the head of the railroad employee. The man went down to the floor.

At a ticket window on the right, the seller turned around casually. Howard waved a gun at him. "All right, Mister, come back here and open the safe."

"And make it snappy," Parker snarled.

The ticket seller trembled violently. "But I c-can't open the vault," he gasped. "It's — it's got a time-lock on it."

Parker sent a bullet smashing into the floor at the ticket seller's feet. "The time-lock better not be working," he said, "or *your* time's up. Come on!"

The trembling ticket seller hurried back toward the huge steel vault. He put his hand on the big dial and hesitated once more.

"I — I can't —"

"All right, Parker," said Howard.

John Parker stepped up behind the ticket seller and rapped him sharply over the head with the long barreled revolver, but not hard enough to knock him unconscious.

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"I'll count three," he said. "One, two —"

"I'll open it!" screamed the ticket seller.

At the far end of the ticket seller's compartments a couple of men were scrambling under counters. A small revolver banged and a bullet ricocheted off a desk near Parker. Howard answered the shot with one from his own gun, and Parker, to hurry the man at the safe, raked the side of his face with the gunsight on the Navy Colt.

"Hurry!"

The terrified ticket seller spun the dial to the right and then to the left and again to the right. He gripped the wheel on the door, twisted it, and pulled on the door. It came open.

Parker struck him again with the revolver and the man fell forward on his knees, into the vault. "The money," Parker ordered, "and quick about it!"

Behind him a pitched battle seemed to be going on, but Parker paid no heed. He was leaving all that to Howard. Gunfire wasn't going to distract him from the main part of the job.

The ticket seller, blood streaming from his head, was bringing out stacks of bills. Parker stuffed them into the side pockets of the light topcoat he had acquired earlier in the evening.

The ticket seller raised his hands.

"That's all —"

"Fine," said Parker, and shot him through the head. Then he turned and coolly stepped out of the vault.

"All right," said Howard. "Now, let's see how you are on the getaway. A job doesn't count unless you get away."

Parker ran to the door leading into the waiting-room and whipped it open. A policeman was charging toward him, less than thirty feet away. Without breaking his stride, Parker sent a bullet at the policeman and saw him pitch forward on his face.

Policemen seemed to be coming from all sides then. Parker and Howard ran, firing to the right and left. Bullets whizzed about them and one raked Parker's left shoulder. It stung, but the pain wasn't much.

And then they were clear of the railroad station and running across the street to the parked car. A bluecoat was standing beside it, writing out a ticket.

Parker let him have a bullet, right in the stomach. As the man went down, Parker jerked open the door by the driver's seat and climbed in behind the wheel. He got out the ignition key, started the car, and jerked it away from the curb. At that moment the policeman lying in the street got out his service revolver and taking careful aim, fired.

A sudden roaring filled John Parker's ears. For a moment a red haze appeared before his eyes, then it vanished and he saw the huge concrete pillar directly before him. He knew that he ought to turn the wheel of the car, but he couldn't. As if from

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a far distance he heard the crash —

Howard said: "Are you ready to give me the gun?"

Parker knew that it was only a matter of seconds now. "Take it!" he gasped.

Howard shook his head. "No, I can't take it. You've got to give it to me."

The gun was in John Parker's hand. But it was heavy — heavy. He tried to lift it and couldn't. He saw alarm come into Howard's face.

"I — I can't lift it —"

"You've got to," Howard cried. "It's seventy years. It's too long. You've got to give me the gun. Try. Try hard!"

Parker tried once more and blood gushed from his mouth. "Who are you?" he whispered. "Who are you?"

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *Who is the original owner of the dragoon pistol? Mr. Gruber has furnished plenty of clues — the physical appearance of Howard, the dates, the description of the gun. If you haven't yet guessed the man's identity, please read on . . .*

"Don't you know who I am?" Howard exclaimed. "I'm the original owner of that gun. I'm . . . Jesse James!"

"But you said your name was Howard."

"Of course. It's the name I always used. I couldn't go around telling people I was Jesse James, could I? A hundred Pinkerton men were looking for me, a thousand sheriffs, twenty thousand Federal soldiers. And none of them got me. No man ever got me as long as I had that gun on me. And then — then I put it down one day. I stepped up on a chair to straighten a picture and Bob Ford killed me. Shot me from behind, the dirty little coward. They wrote a song about it:

" 'The dirty little coward
Who shot Mr. Howard —' "

The roaring was in John Parker's ears again. He was slipping down, down.

"Jesse James," he said. "The gun of Jesse James. So that's why —"

"Of course, of course!" said Jesse James, impatiently. "The gun's cursed. Every man who owns it is cursed. That's why I have to get it. I — I can't rest until I get the gun. Give it to me, Parker. Give it to me — and die!"

There was an ounce of strength still in John Parker's body — an ounce of strength and a grain of will power. He coordinated the two and brought up the Navy Colt.

"Take it!" he said — and died.

Watch EQ on TV

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Many of America's finest poets have contributed to the pages of EQMM, and surprisingly enough with tales of crime and detection. Poe, of course, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stephen Vincent Benét, Christopher Morley, and Joyce Kilmer. And as we promised in an earlier issue, we plan to bring you stories of mystery and crime by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and others.

Now we are deeply honored to present a short-short story by Mark Van Doren, one of America's most distinguished living poets. This story was submitted to EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest and won a Special Award.

Mark Van Doren is not only a poet but a famous critic, biographer, editor, teacher, and lecturer. Among his anthologies are the OXFORD BOOK OF AMERICAN PROSE *and his brilliantly edited* ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD POETRY. *He is said to be one of the most inspiring teachers of our time, with a profound sympathy both for the work being studied and for the students doing the studying; and his sense of humor, which has made his classes extremely popular, especially at Columbia University, is a by-word among all the students who have taken Mr. Van Doren's courses.*

Most critics agree that Mr. Van Doren's poetry has "a clean and chiseled quality," which is the direct outgrowth of the clear-thinking sanity to which he always aspires. Critics have also said that Mr. Van Doren's poetry is that of the intellect rather than of passion. Yet here is a short story by the poet which reveals not only his intellectual strength but also a deep-rooted passion for the oppressed and an emotional understanding for those strange motives which lie dormant in the hearts of most of us . . .

AN EPISODE AT THE HONEYPOT

by MARK VAN DOREN

THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN SITTING on the cot rose anxiously, his hat crumpled in his hand, and came to the door of the cell as the warden waited for the guard to open it. Behind the warden stood a short stranger wearing glasses that seemed to catch all the light in the corridor. They were looking, those glasses, not at the man by the door but at the boy who pressed himself against the far wall of the little room into which both had been locked.

"His father," remarked the warden

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over his shoulder. "He won't stay." Then to the man with his hat crumpled in his hand: "You'll have to leave now. This is the lawyer they assigned, and it's nobody's business what he talks about to *him*." He didn't even glance at the boy. "Come on. You'll follow me and the guard."

"But can't I say —"

"No, not a word. Come on."

The man looked back at his son, who still pressed himself against the wall, and waved his hat nervously. "Tell him," he said. "Tell him everything. Whatever happened, tell *him*." The lawyer was already in the cell, his brief-case open on the cot. He was taking out a pad of foolscap, and peering in to see what else was there. "Tell Mr. —"

"Detwold," said the lawyer without looking up.

"Come on," the warden called again, and this time the man obeyed. It seemed to matter a great deal that he had learned the lawyer's name. "Mr. Detwold," he recited to himself as he disappeared.

"Now," said the lawyer, quietly. "Now."

The boy had relaxed a little, but he still didn't leave his place. His dark eyes, darker because he hadn't slept, searched the glasses for any expression they might have. He had to look down at Mr. Detwold, he was so much taller.

"Don't be afraid," said the lawyer, turning the nose of his mechanical pencil to the point of readiness. "I want you to clear your mind of everything except the facts as you remember them."

"I'm not afraid." There was strain in every feature of the prisoner's face, but perhaps he was right: fear wasn't the cause.

"Nobody would blame you. Murder —"

"That's it!" The boy moved closer to the man. "I did it, and I shouldn't have. There's no more to say. Why did they send you? Why don't they —"

"Now, now." Detwold smoothed the blank paper he had balanced on his knee. He was sitting on the edge of the cot, with room at his side for the prisoner if he chose; but the prisoner didn't choose. "That's not the way to talk. Did you tell your father everything? He said —"

"I told him nothing."

Detwold must have suspected this, for he nodded wisely. "Somebody strange is better. Now let's begin at the beginning. You were in the Honeypot Café, in a booth on the south side. When did you arrive there? And did you come alone? I want those items first."

"I suppose it was about eleven, and of course I was alone. But that has nothing to do with it. *They* came in."

"Ah! This is more like it. They — you mean his gang? *He* wasn't alone?"

The boy dropped his hands to his sides and looked out into the corridor. "No, no, not Herrigan. He wasn't there then, or at least I don't know if he was. *They* came."

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Detwold looked up at him, astonished.

"The man and the woman, and the little boy. She was carrying the boy. The father came in first — I saw the mother outside, watching him through the window. She was tired — I could tell — but she had to wait till he spoke to the counterman. Then she came in. They didn't have any money, they were stranded, I'm sure of that."

Detwold fingered the rims of his glasses. "Nobody told me about any such people. Look here now, don't waste time. Herrigan *was* there, you know. He showed up at ten-thirty, as I understand he often did. He's the one you went at with the fork, he's the one you —"

"Yes, yes! I killed him. And I shouldn't have. Why don't they let it stand that way? I'm guilty — so what difference do you think *you're* going to make?" Yet he spoke gently, as if he knew why Detwold was trying to help. "Please, Mr. Detwold, let's not make up a story."

"But you are." The lawyer took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, that were pale gray and surrounded by the finest of fine lines. "These people — let's see, did you tell your father about them? The tired woman —"

"Tell *him?*" If the prisoner could laugh, he seemed to be saying, he would do so now. But he could not laugh, and for a moment he could not go on. Then he did. "Tell *him!* When it was so much like what he did once — what *we* did once."

Mr. Detwold stared again. He was not unkind, he was simply in the dark.

"I can't explain it," said the boy, "but she was like my mother. The tired look, and later on, when they were in the booth next to me and the little boy was drinking his milk, the sweet, crooked way she smiled. She didn't really look like my mother, but this made me think so then. It even made me think she *was* — oh, I don't expect you to believe it."

For the lawyer had sat up straighter, had grown alert.

"Nobody could believe me, but it's the explanation. Not the excuse, the explanation. She told me, once, when I was twelve I think —"

"You're nineteen?"

The boy nodded. "She told me how we all had to do that after he lost his job. He would walk ahead, and she would keep a little way down the street, with me — just far enough so she couldn't hear — and he would stop people and ask them for a quarter, or a half-dollar, for food. Sometimes he got a dime or so, sometimes he didn't get a cent. She couldn't help watching, though he told her not to. She was afraid for him. Not just ashamed — she was afraid somebody would turn him in. She was glad she couldn't hear what they said, but she was always wondering what it was. I wish *I* could remember that time. I was only two. She told me when I was twelve. She told me one night when she missed him more than usual. He got another job, you understand,

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and then he left us. I grew up with her. Tonight's the first time in years he's talked to me. I didn't talk to him. I didn't tell him anything."

A guard coughed in the corridor. The lawyer looked at his watch. It was almost forty-eight hours since Herrigan had died at the Honeypot.

"You think I'm wasting time," said the boy.

"So far I do. I still don't see —"

"Of course you don't. Nobody would. But there isn't any more. As soon as they sat down in the next booth, and I saw her smile — the same sweet, crooked smile my mother had when there wasn't anything to look happy about — I wasn't where I was at all. I was back in the time before she died, and she was telling me how we were beggars once. She wasn't dead, and he wasn't married to that other woman I've never seen. If I was anybody I was the little boy. I wasn't him, though, not really. I didn't think so for a minute. I was only sitting in the next booth, and they were talking to each other in theirs — not much, and I couldn't hear what they said, but it might have been about the counterman that let them have the milk and the buns, or what they would do next, or maybe where they would spend the night."

The lawyer, looking up, saw how far the prisoner's attention had wandered from his predicament.

"You see," said the boy, "it was no place for them to be, the Honeypot. It's not a nice place, in case you don't know. I go there on the way home from the plant, every night I do overtime, and usually I'm hungry; so I drop in for a sandwich. But it's no place for children, or for a woman like my mother was. I've often thought about the Honeypot — too sweet a name for it, if you want my opinion. They looked right away like people that didn't belong there. Most of the customers, most nights, look like rats out of a cellar. Or worms out of the ground —"

"All right, all right," said the lawyer, "I'm sure it's no place for women and children, but still you haven't said what this has to do with Herrigan. He was one of the worms, I don't doubt it for a minute, but what difference did that make?"

"He poisoned her."

Detwold lifted a hand in protest, in warning against wild statements.

"He did, I tell you, in his way. I said so to the first policeman that came. He didn't hear, or pretended he didn't, so I never mentioned it again. It doesn't matter anyhow. Why should anybody care what I thought? It's what I *did* — I'll never deny that."

The lawyer hitched forward to the edge of the cot. "Of course you won't. I'm not asking you to, with all those witnesses and your own confession. That's not what I'm here for. Go on now. Tell me what you thought."

"I was crazy — you want to prove that? Oh, no, Mr. Detwold, I wasn't crazy. I was wrong. I was unfair to Herrigan. I expected him to see the same woman I did, to see my mother

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sitting there, smiling that tired smile. Why should he? When Herrigan came up to her —"

"What?"

"Why, yes! That's everything. The man was in the toilet then, with the little boy, and she was alone — right in front of me she was, facing me over the mahogany partition between the booths. I was looking at her, but she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at Herrigan, who came up from somewhere behind me, and started saying things."

"What things?"

But the boy had turned away.

"Don't you see," said Detwold quietly, as if he knew he couldn't force his way, "don't you see how important this is?"

"Important?" The boy turned back and looked down at him. "It's the only thing. It's why —"

"What did Herrigan say?"

"You know."

"But I don't know. Was he drunk?"

"I didn't think so. He said rat things. He asked her to go some place with him. He laughed about the little boy, and leaned over and said — you know what I mean, Mr. Detwold. He poisoned her. She stopped smiling."

"How long was her husband gone?"

"Oh, he came back before I could do a thing. I was getting up, I was trying to say something, when she saw him coming. She ran right past Herrigan — she didn't touch him, though — and grabbed the little boy and made for the door."

"Listen! Could you give a description of those people? Does anybody know about them? You said you told the policeman — which policeman?" Detwold was on his feet now. "What did the man look like?"

"I told you what *she* looked like."

"A crooked smile! I mean facts."

"That's a fact."

"I mean something to put on the tape. They may be out of town by now. The bus terminal's right there, and the railroad station too. On the other hand, if they had no money —"

"I'm sure they didn't. But I won't tell any more. You let them be. You let *her* be."

Detwold already had his brief-case under his arm.

"Herrigan didn't know. He was a worm, but he didn't see her the way I did. When I reached over and —"

"It's all clear now." Detwold was shaking the door of the cell.

"It wasn't clear to Herrigan. I had no right —"

"Where's that guard?" But he was coming even then. "We've got a chance, boy. Think it over. I'll be back as soon as they can get it on the tape. Think it over. Try to realize how much help a little description would be — just a little. You'll let the police have it — I know that. You'll do it, won't you?"

"Let her be!"

Detwold disappeared down the black corridor.

"*You let her be!*"

There was no sign at all that the lawyer heard . . .

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LONELY BOY

by HUGH PENTECOST

DR. ROBERT DAKIN WAS AN ANgular, Lincolnesque man with a stern, sad face. He stood at the windows of his office, his back to his sister Sophia, looking down over the green lawns and shrubbery to the distant athletic field of the Dakin School for Boys. He was thinking of the wistful, lonesome face of Tommy Blount, aged fifteen, an unexceptional member of the third form.

"You can't do it to the boy, Robert," Sophia Dakin said. "It would kill him!"

"I have no choice," he said.

Miss Sophia Dakin had soft gray hair which she wore back from her face and knotted at the nape of her neck. Her brown eyes, normally kind and friendly, were bright with rebellion. Her lips were drawn together and there was a tautness in her figure.

"You'll have to tell Tommy the truth," she said.

Dakin's deep-set eyes looked wounded. "I can't," he said.

"*What?*"

He spread his big hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I can't tell him the truth, Sophia, because I can't prove it. If I made the accusation, Ellis Blount could bring an action against us which would involve the whole school in a vicious scandal."

"But what are you going to say to Tommy?"

Dakin lifted a hand to his eyes. "I can only refuse to send the invitation," he said. "Without explanation."

"And watch him die in front of you?" Sophia said.

Dakin's eyes suddenly blazed. "May you be cursed, Ellis Blount!"

Tommy Blount lived in a world more wonderful than all his fantasies. For four long years he had been at Dakin's; four years in which he had made no real friends, had no real fun, had no place to turn for love, or friendship, or even a decent amount of respect. In the very beginning, when he'd first come to the school, he'd been regarded with some interest by his schoolmates because of the fact that he was Ellis Blount's son. Ellis had been in Hollywood then, and several of his pictures were shown in the local theater. There was a vicarious glamor in being the son of a famous matinee idol. But when it developed that Tommy himself had never been to Hollywood, knew none of the currently popular sweater girls, and, more important, that he could not use his connections to get theater tickets, the glamor quickly wore off.

Tommy had to go it on his own, and he was woefully inadequate. He was pathetically shy and inhibited,

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and it was soon discovered that he was no asset to the drama club. He was just a lonely little boy, without the special spark that would result in his being "taken in" by the popular groups in the school.

Tommy's mother had died when he was four years old. She and Ellis had already been separated, and Tommy sensed Ellis's resentment at having to assume responsibility for him. Ellis always put on a great act in public about how proud he was of his son, but the truth was that the sad-looking boy was disturbing to Ellis Blount. Tommy was a clear index that the perennial matinee idol was aging.

For Tommy one of the worst times of the year at Dakin was the senior prom. If you brought a girl you made out a formal dance card for her, and if you went stag you went to your friends and got dances on their cards. No one ever had any dances left when Tommy asked timidly about them.

But this year, something wonderful had happened to Tommy. Ellis came east to star in *Heartbreak* on Broadway and one Sunday in the fall appeared at Dakin. He didn't come alone. With him was a girl — a vision of loveliness, a dream princess. She was, Tommy guessed, about twenty. Her name was Sandra Graves. She was warm, and sparkling and magnetic. Tommy felt tongue-tied in her presence. Ellis, looking a little older than he did on the screen or stage, was his dashing, dark, handsome self.

"Don't be so shy, Tommy!" he said. "I brought Sandra especially for you! She won't want to come again if you act like a bump on a log."

Sandra had slipped her arm through Tommy's and laughed a silvery laugh. "Don't pay any attention to him, Tommy. He wants to talk to Dr. Dakin anyway. You show me around the school."

It was his dream world come true. Tommy managed so that as many of the boys as possible saw him with the wondrous Sandra. He stammered out a burning wish just before they rejoined Ellis. "Would you let me — may I — may I write to you, Sandra?"

"But of course, Tommy! I'd love it," she told him.

And so he began pouring out his heart to her in a stream of letters.

Ellis brought her back again, quite often. Tommy's prestige rose. Even Wilfred Hadley, the head boy, asked him about Sandra, and Tommy said: "We're — we're sort of engaged."

It wasn't too improbable, Tommy told himself. She couldn't be more than five years older than he was. In three years he would be eighteen, and lots of people get married at eighteen.

"Lucky you!" Hadley had said.

Then came that day in the spring when Ellis brought Sandra to the school and Tommy got up his courage to ask her to the prom.

"But, Tommy, I'd love it!" she said.

His cup was filled to overflowing.

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He put her name down on his list for the formal invitations that were sent out by Dr. Dakin and Miss Sophia, and waited for the day when the dance programs would be made out. It was a great day. He didn't have to go pleading for dances. He just sat in his room and they came to him — and Wilfred Hadley was one of the first. His problem really was to save some dances for himself. The boys kidded him, and laughed and joked with him, and for the first time in his whole life he felt he belonged.

It was the morning after that one of the new boys stuck his head in the door of Tommy's classroom. "Dr. Dakin wants you, Blount."

Tommy felt no premonition of disaster. Dr. Dakin often talked to him about his studies, and how things were going.

As he walked across the campus toward the headmaster's office, boys who had never noticed him before waved and shouted, "Hi-ya, kid!" It was easy, and natural and wonderful. Sandra had done this for him; wonderful, unbelievable Sandra.

Dr. Dakin was sitting in the swivel chair behind his desk. He looked tired, and a little gray. Tommy wondered if he wasn't feeling well.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, Blount," Dr. Dakin said. "Sit down if you like."

Tommy sat down in a straight chair beside the desk.

Dr. Dakin turned his own chair so that he was looking out the window. "I've been going over the invitations to the Senior Prom, Blount," he said.

"Yes, sir." Tommy guessed what was coming. Some one girl was always made queen for the prom weekend. It was almost always the head boy's girl. But Tommy sensed that an exception was to be made. It wasn't unnatural that they simply couldn't bypass Sandra.

"Blount, I'm extremely sorry," Dr. Dakin said, "but I cannot send out your invitation to Miss Graves."

Tommy sat frozen in his chair. He couldn't have heard correctly. "I — I beg your pardon, sir. I — I don't think I —"

"I know what a disappointment it is to you, Blount," Dr. Dakin said. "I'm more sorry than I can say."

Tommy's mouth was dry as dust. "But, sir — *why?* I don't understand!"

A nerve twitched in Dr. Dakin's cheek. "As you know, Blount, these invitations go through mine and my sister's hands to make certain there are no — no mistakes. Unfortunately it is quite impossible that Miss Graves should come to the dance with you."

"*Why?*" Tommy's voice shook. His eyes felt scorched, and his throat ached intolerably.

Dr. Dakin swung around to face Tommy, and his deep-set eyes were filled with pain. "Blount, I'm afraid I can't offer you an explanation."

"But you can't do this, sir!" Tommy cried. "You — you *have* to explain!" You didn't talk to Dr.

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Dakin that way, but what did it matter? The whole world was spinning off into space.

"I'm afraid I can't explain, Blount," Dr. Dakin said.

"You can't drop it there, sir!" Tommy's voice rose to something like a shriek. "You're attacking Miss Graves. I'll go to Ellis — I'll tell him — we'll get the finest lawyer in the world — we'll sue you — we'll— we'll —"

Dr. Dakin was silent for a moment listening to Tommy's sobs. "Yes, you should go to see your father, Blount. You can catch the twelve forty from Peekskill. I'll have the station wagon drive you over. And you have my permission to stay home until after the prom. You needn't tell the other boys, Blount. We'll simply say you're ill."

"You can't do this," Tommy said. "I want the whole world to know what a — what a *heel* you are, sir!" The room was suddenly a tomb. Tommy waited for the lightning to strike; for the thunderbolt to rip through the ceiling and kill him dead.

The nerve twitched again in Dr. Dakin's cheek. "I think you'd better get ready for your trip to New York, Blount."

Tommy turned and ran out of the office. Outside, in the corridor, he ran head on into Miss Sophia Dakin. He tried to jam his way past her.

"Tommy! Tommy, my dear!" she said, gently.

"Go away!" Tommy screamed at her shrilly. "Go away! Go away!"

Tommy reached his room in East Hall, and locked the door behind him. The clock on his desk told him it would be nearly two hours to train time. He felt as though he were going to vomit, and he lay down on the bed and prayed it wouldn't happen. He didn't want to have to go down the hall to the bathroom. Someone might see him and ask him what the trouble was.

He was horribly confused. Dr. Dakin was a stern man; he was severe if you broke the rules; but he was also a just man. Tommy had always clung to that idea in his four miserable years in the school. He might not be happy, he might not have friends, but you could count on a square deal at Dakin. Now this!

He rolled over on his face and beat his fists into the pillow. He can't do this! *He can't do this!* Tommy began to think about retaliation. He had learned never to count on Ellis too much, but Ellis had brought Sandra to the school. He'd just *have* to take a hand in this. They'd get a famous lawyer. They'd make Dr. Dakin pay every cent he had in the world for this outrage. Even that didn't seem enough. For a wild moment Tommy had a fantasy of Ellis giving Dr. Dakin a physical beating.

When he arrived at Grand Central, Tommy went to a phone booth and called Ellis's apartment. There was no answer. For a moment he felt lost and frightened.

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Even if Ellis wasn't at home, Yakima, his Philippine valet and dresser, always answered. Then Tommy realized that this was a matinee day and that both Ellis and Yakima would be at the theater. It was five minutes to two and Tommy figured he'd get to the theater about a quarter past and there'd be fifteen minutes in which to talk to Ellis before he had to go on.

The doorman at the theater remembered him. "You know where your father's dressing room is, son?"

"Yes, sir," Tommy said.

He walked backstage, to the dressing room door with the star on it. He knocked and after a moment Yakima stuck his head out. Yakima was all teeth and beady eyes, and to the best of Tommy's knowledge he never did anything but hiss. He would hiss in different inflections.

"Ssss!" Yakima said, expressing surprise and pleasure.

"Who is it, Yakima?" Ellis's deep rich voice came from inside.

Yakima turned and said, "Sssss!" and opened the door wide enough for Ellis to see. Ellis was seated at his dressing table, his broad shoulders draped with a bright orange silk dressing gown, looking very handsome.

"Tommy!" Ellis said, scowling. "What the devil are you doing here? Why aren't you at school?"

"I had to see you, Father," Tommy said, walking into the room. He moistened his lips. "Something's happened — something terrible —"

"What the hell have you been up to now?" Ellis said.

"I haven't done anything, Father," Tommy said. "But —"

"I can't talk to you now, Tommy," Ellis said. "You know that."

"But, Father, I ——"

"I'll talk to you after the matinee," Ellis said. He turned away, leaned toward the mirror with its frame of colored light bulbs, and put two little red dots at the corners of his eyes.

"But, Father!"

Ellis faced him again. "Now, look, Tommy, I can't talk now. Go out front and see the show — or go to a movie — or sit there in the corner and *keep still*. After the performance I'll have time."

"I'll wait here," Tommy said. He sat on a straight chair in the corner, rigid, unmoving. Someone pounded on the door and said, "Five minutes, Mr. Blount." Then Ellis was gone.

At the end of the third act there was a long scene between Ellis and Miss Granville, the leading lady. Just about the time this scene had begun, someone started to walk past the open dressingroom door, then stopped and looked in.

It was Michael Lorrimer, who played Ellis's rival in the play. "Hello, Tommy," Lorrimer said. He had taken a cigarette from a silver case and he dragged the smoke deep into his lungs. Lorrimer was blond and very good-looking.

"Hello, sir," Tommy said.

Lorrimer frowned. "What's the matter? You sick, kid?"

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"I'm quite all right, sir."

"The hell you say! Have you seen Ellis yet?"

"Yes, sir. I've been here all afternoon."

"Why aren't you in school?" Lorrimer asked.

Why doesn't he go away? Tommy thought. He tried to be as polite as possible. "I had to see Ellis, sir."

Lorrimer's eyes narrowed, and the blue make-up shadowing gave them an odd look. "Look here, Tommy, is this something about Sandra?"

Tommy could only stare at him.

Lorrimer took the half-smoked cigarette from his mouth, threw it to the floor and stamped on it.

"Tommy, allow me to commiserate with you," he said. "Your old man is the biggest stinker this side of purgatory. Any guy who would play a practical joke on his own son with his own mistress —" Lorrimer didn't finish. What he had said had come out in violent rage and he looked sorry it had happened. "Forget it, kid," he said, "only so help me —"

Tommy hadn't heard the applause. He hadn't heard the sound of Ellis coming along the hall. He hadn't heard anything but one word: mistress!

"What the blazes are you doing here, Lorrimer?" Ellis demanded.

Lorrimer's voice was unsteady. "Delivering a monologue on what a heel you are, Ellis — what a low-down, low-grade heel you are!"

"Get out!" Ellis said.

"I wouldn't think," Lorrimer said, "you could stand the stench of your own rotting insides!"

"*Get out!*" Ellis shouted at him. Then he turned to look at Tommy. Even he must have seen the horror on the small young face. "It can't be as bad as all that, Tommy," Ellis said, producing his Number One smile.

The words came out of Tommy, disjointed, unconnected. "Dr. Dakin — Sandra can't come to the dance — and Mr. Lorrimer said —"

"What did Mr. Lorrimer say?" Ellis asked.

"That — that you and Sandra — Father! *Father!*"

Ellis scowled at himself in the dressing-table mirror.

"If — if that's true," Tommy said, in a cracked voice, "then that explains — Dr. Dakin —" The voice broke as a sob welled up into the aching throat.

Ellis whirled around from the mirror, exasperated. "You have to grow up sometime!" he said.

Tommy turned and ran, stumbling, sobbing, out of the room. . . .

The little man in baggy pants threw a pie squarely into the face of the big man with the walrus mustache. The movie house rocked with laughter. Tommy stared, his face numb, unable to laugh. He couldn't follow the action of the film. As a matter of fact, he couldn't even remember having come into the movie house. He remembered walking around the streets for a long time. There were pictures much more vivid

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to him than the little man in the baggy pants and the big man with the walrus mustache. There was a picture of Ellis, on his knees, begging for forgiveness, and Tommy coldly refusing. There was a picture of Michael Lorrimer, apologizing again and again.

There was a picture of Sandra, assuring him it was all untrue, welcoming him into her apartment, holding her in his arms. Then, when he stepped away, there was a bright red badge of honor on her bosom.

There was another picture, of his going to Sandra's apartment and standing in the foyer, wondering whether to ring the bell beside her name on the brass plate, or to go up, because the foyer door was open. And while he was waiting. Michael Lorrimer, a hat pulled down over his face, came running down the stairs and brushed past him onto the street. Then the picture of himself going upstairs to the door of Sandra's apartment, and it, like the foyer door, was open, and there was Sandra to welcome him, to tell him it was all untrue, and that she loved him forever and ever — but there was a horrible smell, like blood. . . .

The little man with the baggy pants dumped a bucket of whitewash over the head of the big man with the walrus mustache. The laughter frightened Tommy; it was so loud and he couldn't see anything funny. Then he noticed the clock, with a lighted face, to the right of the screen. It said a quarter to twelve! He had left Ellis right after the matinee, which must have been about five o'clock. He tried to disentangle his fantasies of revenge from reality. The trouble was he couldn't remember anything that was real. When he stood up and moved clumsily out of the row of seats and up the aisle to the rear of the theater, he realized that his legs ached, as though he'd walked a long way.

Out on the street it was night — but very bright from the city lights. A quarter to twelve; a quarter to midnight. Where could he go? To Ellis's apartment, except that he could never see Ellis again as long as he lived. To Sandra's — but if he did he would have to tell her and maybe she would say it was all true and he couldn't stand that. He could get a late train back to school, but he had called Dr. Dakin a heel and they probably wouldn't let him back to his room. There was no choice, he'd have to risk it.

It was twenty minutes past twelve when he walked in the Vanderbilt Avenue entrance to Grand Central Station. He stood on the balcony there, looking down into the main part of the station. It was peculiarly deserted, he thought, and the people looked small, aimless, and somehow threatening.

He walked slowly down the marble staircase, headed for the Information Booth. Just as he was approaching the booth to inquire about the next train to Peekskill, a strange man walked up to him — a big man with a kind of hard, unfriendly face.

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"Are you Tommy Blount?" the man asked.

"Why, yes, sir," Tommy said, surprised.

The big man pushed his hat back on his head. "We thought you might show up here."

"I — I don't think I know who you are, sir," Tommy said.

"I'm a policeman, son. Name of Callahan," the big man said.

Tommy felt a sudden wave of relief. They had missed him. They had been anxious about him. "I'm on my way back to school."

"Fine," Callahan said. "I've a car up on the street. I'll drive you. But first I've got to let them know I've found you. There's a phone booth over there."

When Callahan came out of the booth Tommy said, "Maybe I should phone my father, sir — if he's been worrying."

"Your father's at the school," Callahan said. "You'll see him when we get there."

Tommy felt very weary and satisfied. It was comforting to have someone take charge and tell him what to do. Callahan didn't say anything as they crossed town and drove onto the West Side Highway. The green sedan was humming along smoothly, steadily. Tommy was almost asleep when Callahan said, softly, "Was she dead when you got there, Tommy, or did you kill her?"

Tommy's eyes were suddenly wide open, and a nameless terror sent his heart pounding against his ribs.

"Sir?" he asked, in a whisper.

"We know you were there, son. We know you were in quite a state," Callahan said, not unkindly. "Was she dead when you got there, or did you stab her?"

Tommy felt a fresh horror. He realized he didn't have to ask Callahan whom he was talking about. He was talking about Sandra. *Was she dead when you got there, or did you stab her?* The red badge of honor on Sandra's bosom — and the smell of blood!

There was only one light in Dr. Dakin's study. It was a student lamp, and it cast a yellow circle of light down over the desk and a wider circle on the floor. It revealed Ellis Blount's custom-made cordovans crossed tensely under his chair; it revealed Michael Lorrimer's brown suèdes doing a little tap dance of nerves near the window; it revealed Dr. Dakin's square black brogans and Miss Sophia's neat high-heeled pumps; and it revealed the black and white sport shoes belonging to Lieutenant Mason of Homicide.

"They don't hang a small boy for a thing like this, do they?" Ellis Blount asked in a voice rough with fatigue and anxiety.

Lieutenant Mason was one of the department's bright young men; college degree, F.B.I. police school, good clothes. He looked more like a business executive than the common notion of a flat-footed detective. He was smoking a cigarette, and when

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Ellis spoke he inhaled on it deeply, and let the smoke out in a long sigh.

"Your concern for your son is touching, Mr. Blount," he said.

"Lord knows it's heartbreaking," Ellis said, "but who else can it have been?"

"You, Blount," Mason said. "It's possible that you discovered Miss Graves was going to leave you for a younger man — Mr. Lorrimer."

"That's not true," Lorrimer said from the corner.

"Or that you, Lorrimer, discovered that she was going to marry Ellis Blount, cutting you entirely out of the picture," Mason said.

"She *was* going to marry me," Ellis said. "She'd promised me."

"That's a lie, too," Lorrimer said. "She hadn't made up her mind. I was working on her, I don't deny that. A man who'd play a lousy practical joke on his own son, because he was so terrified of leaving a woman alone for five minutes that he had to invent a phony relationship so he could bring her here when he visited his son — I tried to tell her he was no kind of a man to marry."

"You haven't answered my question, Lieutenant," Ellis said. "They don't hang a small boy for a thing like this, do they?"

Dr. Dakin spoke for the first time, deep-voiced, angry. "Have you passed sentence on Tommy already, Mr. Blount? Can't you wait till we hear his story?"

"I'm not passing judgment, Dakin. I blame myself. Blame myself entirely. But he went away so quickly — in such a frenzy!"

"Frenzy is the proper word," Mason said, thoughtfully. "The apartment was turned upside-down. The girl fought a hand-to-hand struggle with her assailant. It's my own opinion she was getting the better of it when the murderer picked up the paper cutter on the table and drove it into her heart. It wasn't a planned murder. It developed out of fury — the fury of a cast-off lover, adult or adolescent."

"There's a car!" Miss Sophia Dakin said. The clock on Dr. Dakin's desk showed twenty minutes of two.

Callahan brought Tommy into the office. The boy stood in the doorway, looking around at the shadowy figures. Miss Sophia went to him and put her arms around him.

"Tommy, my dear, dear Tommy," she said, gently.

Then the tears came, from deep down, wracking, tortured. Ellis Blount got up from his chair, but he hesitated until finally the crying subsided.

Before he could speak to his son, Mason had stepped past him and was standing by Tommy, a hand on his shoulder.

"Tommy," he said, "I'm Lieutenant Mason. I guess Mr. Callahan has told you why we're all here?"

"Y-yes, sir," Tommy said.

"Don't worry, son," Ellis said. "We'll get you the very best lawyer. We'll see to it that —"

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"Shut up!" Mason said, so sharply the words seemed to ricochet off the walls of the room. Then once more he was gentle. "We know a great deal about your part in this, Tommy. About the invitation Dr. Dakin couldn't send, and why he couldn't send it. We know about your trip to New York where you found out the truth, and we know that you've been missing ever since that time — about five o'clock."

"Y-yes, sir."

"Miss Graves is dead, Tommy, and we have to find out who killed her. You understand that?"

Tommy nodded.

"Now, Tommy, you tell us about your day — from the time you left school."

Tommy looked up at Mason and he saw a friendly, reasonable man. He tried very hard to think back over his day — it seemed as though it had lasted all his life. "I took the train from Peekskill, sir. I went to the theater." He swallowed hard. "Ellis couldn't talk to me until after the play, so I waited in his dressing room. Then Mr. Lorrimer came in and he happened to — to let it slip."

"Let what slip, Tommy?"

"About — about Sandra and my father," Tommy said. His throat was aching again. He was afraid he was going to cry.

"Go on, Tommy," Mason said.

"Then Ellis came in and he — he —"

"Yes, Tommy?"

Ellis broke in. "What the devil! I told him it was true. What else could I do?"

Tommy's head was throbbing. This was the place where it went all haywire. This was the place where he couldn't remember what was true and what was dreams. He moistened his dry lips.

"I — I left the theater," he said.

Suddenly, the room was deathly still. Tommy couldn't go on. He felt the tears coming again and he turned to Miss Sophia and put his face against her shoulder. Mason waited patiently.

"You went to Miss Graves's apartment then, Tommy?" Mason asked.

"Y-you won't b-believe me, sir, but I'm not sure. I — I just don't remember what I did, sir. I g-guess I was kind of crazy. I — seem to remember the building — with the door open — and Mr. Lorrimer running out of the house. I — I —"

"That must have been when I found her," Michael Lorrimer said, quietly. "I ran out of the place to phone the police."

"Was that the first time you'd been to the apartment, Tommy?" Mason asked. "Or had you been there before — and were you waiting around outside to see what happened?"

"I don't know, sir," Tommy said. His fingernails were biting into the palms of his hands. "I — I d-don't know whether it's real, or what — but I thought I remembered seeing Sandra — with a b-big red stain on her — on her front! And — and —"

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"You were terribly angry," Mason said, gently. "You went to see Miss Graves. When she told you it was true, you exploded. In the struggle you picked up the paper knife. Isn't that the way it was?"

"I d-don't know, sir!" Tommy cried. "I — all I remember are kind of pictures and I was in a movie theater, and I —"

"You don't have to be afraid, Tommy," Ellis cut in. "Just tell the truth. We'll do everything we can for you. I don't think they can convict you for —"

Mason whirled around on him. "Will you keep your damned mouth shut!" he said in a cold fury. It took him a moment to compose his face before he turned back to Tommy. "Well, son?"

"I suppose maybe I — I could have," Tommy whispered. "I — I don't — I'm not —"

"Stop torturing the boy," Miss Sophia said, sharply. "You know he didn't do it, Lieutenant. The girl was killed about four o'clock and Tommy was in his father's dressing room at the theater. There are half a dozen witnesses to prove it."

Mason put his arm around Tommy's shoulder, and his grip felt warm and reassuring to the boy. He let out his breath in a long sigh.

"How did you know the Graves girl was killed at four o'clock, Miss Dakin?" he asked.

Miss Sophia blinked at him. "Why — why, you mentioned it."

"No, Miss Dakin."

"But I — I'm certain you mentioned it. I —"

"I was very careful *not* to mention it, Miss Dakin," Mason said. "It hasn't been in any of the newspaper reports or on the radio."

Miss Sophia's face took on a peculiar glazed pallor. "But you said —"

"I said nothing about time, Miss Dakin. Nor did I mention the fact that we knew you went to New York today — drove down in your car."

"Certainly, I did," Miss Sophia said. "I went shopping."

"Fine. That's easily checked, Miss Dakin. We'll go over your route with you. We'll check with the various salespeople with whom you dealt. We should be able to account for every moment of your time." He looked at her steadily. "Or will we have trouble doing that, Miss Dakin?"

Tommy wanted to cry out — to protest. Why was Mason attacking Miss Sophia, the one person who had ever shown him any affection?

"I had to keep hammering at the boy," Mason said, "in the hope that you'd break, Miss Dakin. I didn't think you'd let him be arrested because — because I think you love him very much. Am I right?" And when she didn't speak: "You can save us all a great deal of trouble and pain, Miss Dakin. In the end we'll have the proof we need."

Miss Sophia was staring down at the handkerchief she was twisting between her fingers. When she spoke, her voice was low.

"Yes — yes, I love him; I wanted

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to protect him, Lieutenant. I went to see the girl to try to persuade her to keep him from learning the truth. I tried to show her that if she would give up the boy's father she might save the boy an unbearable anguish. She laughed at me. *She laughed!*"

Then a strange thing happened to Miss Sophia. Her voice rose and changed quality. She twisted her face into what was a horrible mockery of Sandra. She was suddenly mimicking the murdered woman.

"You wizened-up old maid!" she said. "You don't care about the boy! You hate me because I have what you've never had — a man! You hate me because the boy loves me! You hate me because I'm going to marry his father and because I'll be what you can never be as long as you live! *I'm going to be the boy's mother!*"

There was no sound in the room except Miss Sophia's breathing. A whirlwind of violence had passed over the rest of them and left them dumb.

"That's what she said to me," Miss Sophia said, in a normal voice. "I killed her for it."

The clock ticking, his heart beating, the room spinning round and round Tommy. He clutched at Mason.

"I didn't go there to kill her," Miss Sophia said. "I had no thought except to reason with her, to get her to save the boy some unnecessary anxiety. I didn't believe *he* would admit the truth!" Her eyes moved to Ellis Blount.

Then Tommy heard Ellis's voice. "Come on, Tommy," he said. "We're getting out of this — away from these monstrous people!" Even his choice of words was theatrical.

"Robert!" It was something like a cry of pain from Miss Sophia.

Dr. Robert Dakin responded to that cry. He was somehow standing between Tommy and his father. "I think not, Mr. Blount," he said, his voice bleak. "I think not. Unless you want me to go into court to publicize your fitness as a parent. The boy stays here, if he *will* stay." The deep voice trembled slightly. "Beyond the law of the courts, Mr. Blount, there is a moral law, and if I read it correctly — *you* are the real murderer, with your fancy women and your practical jokes!"

"Thank you for that, Robert," Miss Sophia whispered. "Thank you."

Then Tommy was aware of the dark, sad eyes of the headmaster looking down at him.

"I'd like you to stay here, Tommy," Dr. Dakin said. "I'd like it very much. We're both going to have a pretty bad time and I think we need each other. I know I need you."

Tommy stared at the tall, stooped man, and a great surge of happiness swept over him. *I need you, Tommy!* No one had ever said that to him before — no one in the whole world!

"Will you stay, Tommy — so that we can help each other?" Dr. Dakin asked.

"Please, sir," Tommy said, reaching out to him. "Oh, please!"

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